

Introduction:
**Early Christianity on the Way from the Varangians
to the Greeks**

by Ildar Garipzanov and Oleksiy Tolochko

There has been a long-standing gap between Slavists studying the process of Christianization in Rus' with a focus on Byzantine Orthodoxy and medievalists studying the same process in Scandinavia with a focus on Latin Christendom. Such a historiographic dichotomy is partly the understandable result of the institutional and linguistic divisions between medievalists and Slavists, but it is also due to the realities of modern European geopolitics, whereby Scandinavia and Eastern Europe belong to two distinct parts of Europe differing in terms of their political organization, social complexion and culture. This contemporary division has been projected upon the remote historical past all the way back to the advent of Christianity in these northern and eastern regions of medieval Europe. Yet such a 'teleological' approach to early Christianity contradicts material evidence, which points to common social, political and cultural processes that were developing in late Viking Age Scandinavia and Rus'. In this north-eastern edge of medieval Europe, the contacts and links between the two regions in the tenth and eleventh centuries were as numerous and influential as the better-explored relationships between Scandinavia and its western neighbours on the one hand, and the well-established links between Rus' and Byzantium on the other.¹ The question, then, is whether we should expect that the dissemination of early Christianity in Scandinavia and Rus' in that period was profoundly different from more general patterns of interactions between the two regions.

When Western medievalists and Scandinavian scholars in particular discuss the Christianization of Scandinavia, their accounts focus upon the process by which a 'package' of Christian faith and culture was brought from Latin Europe to Scandinavia, with particular emphasis on the roles of the Anglo-Saxon and German missions. In Eastern European studies, meanwhile, the Christianization of early Rus' is discussed as a process influenced chiefly by Byzantium, and researchers working within the latter academic tradition follow in one or another

¹ See especially Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus, 750–1200* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), pp. 3–180; and *Drevneishie gosudarstva Vostochnoi Evropy, 2009 god* (Moscow: Indrik, 2010).

way the paradigm constructed after the hagiographic discourse of medieval Rus', whereby Christianization is perceived as a phenomenon resulting from a series of individual conversions of Rus' rulers with the country following in their footsteps. Regardless of their differences, both master narratives — ultimately guided by medieval histories, chronicles and the lives of saints — continue to discourage scholars from exploring contacts and borrowings across the north-eastern fringe of European Christendom and do not take into account the growing body of archaeological evidence indicating intensive socio-economic and cultural exchanges between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. This contradiction has become even more apparent in recent years, when archaeologists have shown that the transmission of artefacts associated with early Christianity seems to follow this wider pattern of exchange.² At the same time, archaeological evidence indicating early Christian cross-boundary contacts still lacks a coherent interpretative model.

The discrepancy between the master narratives portraying two separate and essentially different stories of the Christianization process and archaeological evidence showing close contacts between Scandinavia and Rus' in the tenth and eleventh centuries illustrates the gap that exists between archaeologists and text-based scholars in research on Christianization in medieval northern Europe. This is the result of a more general academic split between archaeologists and historians; as one opponent of such a division puts it: 'Modern scholarship fragments the past on the basis of types of evidence — archaeologists study objects, historians study words.'³ Text-based scholarship focuses on the earliest Christian narratives, which demonstrate the gradual forging of a Christian identity in written discourse produced by the intellectual elite. On the other hand, archaeological investigations concentrate on material evidence that shows the spread of Christian beliefs at a 'grass-root' level. Such a separation fosters the continuing existence of two separate, and in some respects incompatible, images of early Christianity in the two regions.

This collection of essays, written by specialists in textual history and archaeology who come from different academic traditions, seeks to address this disparity between textual and material evidence with regard to early Christianity in tenth- and eleventh-century Scandinavia and Rus', departing from traditional historiographic approaches that are based on narrative evidence in an attempt to move towards an alternative interpretative model.⁴ The new model relies

2 See especially *Rom und Byzanz im Norden: Mission und Glaubenswechsel im Ostseeraum während des 8.-14. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Michael Müller-Wille, 2 vols (Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1998); and *Rome, Constantinople and Newly Converted Europe: Archaeological and Historical Evidence, Cracow, Poland, 21–25 September 2010: Book of Abstracts and Addresses*, ed. by Maciej Salamon and others (Cracow and Rzeszów: Mitel, 2010).

3 John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (London: Duckworth, 2001), p. 9.

4 This collection presents selected papers from the conference held in Bergen in October 2010, supported financially by the YFF project 'The "Forging" of Christian Identity in the Northern Periphery (c. 820–c. 1200)', which is funded by the Norwegian Research Council.

more on material evidence and non-narrative written sources, shifting the focus from missionary activities, the conversions of rulers and the establishment of ecclesiastical structures towards the activities of individuals as agents of cross-boundary Christian contacts and influences. It takes into account the existence of a major network of trade and communication extending from Byzantium via Eastern Europe to Scandinavia, better known as the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks. People from different walks of life — priests, monks, lay people and kin groups — travelled along this major European artery, carrying goods and/or transmitting ideas and practices. Christian practices and beliefs were part of this network of cultural exchange. Thus, this trade route was an important factor for bringing early Christianity in Scandinavia and Rus' closer to each other in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Various people who were converted to Christianity in Byzantium or North-Western Europe (and starting from the late-tenth century in Rus' or Scandinavia) travelled along the trading routes, leaving their imprints on the form of early Christianity that was developing on the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks.⁵ The focus of this new interpretative model on individuals as agents of early Christianization and on the north-eastern European circuit of communication as a vehicle of religious transmission makes it conceptually different from recent works on early Christianity in Northern, East-Central and Eastern Europe written within the framework of regional studies and missionary churches connected to either Rome or Constantinople.⁶

The cross-boundary religious exchange that began in the early tenth century was not hindered by the official conversions of Scandinavia and early Rus' in the second half of the tenth and early eleventh centuries. In the post-conversion period, ecclesiastical hierarchs were installed in major cities such as Kiev, Lund and Roskilde, but while they were able to influence their immediate urban surroundings their grip on the vast surrounding countryside was rather loose. The two regions were characterized by their lack of developed ecclesiastical structures and the inability of metropolitans and bishops appointed in the eleventh century to impose uniformity in ritual practices within the territories subordinated to them. The role of proprietary churches located at private estates and controlled by powerful lay people or families seems to have been significant. The earliest monasteries appeared in the second half of the eleventh century in close proximity to princely and royal courts. The system of parish churches did not exist, and travelling clerics of obscure origins may have been of importance for spreading Christian beliefs and practices in the countryside even in the eleventh century.

⁵ Jonathan Shepard expertly deals with this topic in concluding remarks to this volume.

⁶ *Rom und Byzanz im Norden; The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. by Martin Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003); *Från Bysans till Norden: Östliga kyrkoinfluenser under vikingatid och tidig medeltid*, ed. by Henrik Janson (Skellefteå: Artos, 2005); and *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*, ed. by Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

As a result of the specific historical circumstances that existed in the tenth and eleventh centuries, early Christianity in the two regions seems to have been a less coherent phenomenon than in the core regions of Christian Europe. It allowed for more variability and was less strict in its prescriptions regarding what it meant to be Christian. The transmission of Christian ideas by the Varangians travelling between Scandinavia and Byzantium was an essential catalyst for this phenomenon, and the confessional division between the Western and Eastern Churches less useful for its understanding even in the wake of the Great Schism of 1054.

Chronologically, this volume focuses on the tenth and eleventh centuries, while twelfth and thirteenth-century texts are not treated as truthful accounts of the arrival of Christianity to Scandinavia and Rus' — this being the traditional approach adopted by scholars — but as narrative reconfigurations of reality developed in response to the growing systematization of Christian beliefs, practices and organization in both regions from the twelfth century onwards. Of course, it can be debated why and how later medieval authors reconfigured the memory of their early Christian past and possible religious contacts across North-Eastern Europe. No matter how one chooses to tackle these questions, textual criticism is essential if such artefacts of narrative remembrance are to be brought into any discussion of early Christianity in those regions.⁷

One should also be aware that the current 'readings' of such narrative sources have also been framed by long-standing historiographic traditions particular to Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. The first essay in this volume surveys the Norwegian historiography of early Christianity in Norway, which is in need of more substantial research on cross-boundary religious exchanges between the two regions. Ildar Garipzanov reflects upon the emphasis on Western, most importantly English, influences typical of the Norwegian historiography of the twentieth century and upon its apparent lack of interest in Scandinavian religious contacts with Eastern Christianity. This historiographic approach is in line with the more general trend of seeing Norway as an immanent part of Western Europe from the early Christian period onwards. As Garipzanov emphasizes, such an approach is not specific to Norwegian historians and can be traced in the works of other Scandinavian scholars, who traditionally have discarded any discernible influence of Eastern Christianity on early Christian Scandinavia. As is argued in this essay, such a disregard for Eastern religious influences has been due in part to the uncritical reading of later Scandinavian written sources, which rarely mention religious contacts with Eastern Christianity. Such narratives written with

⁷ These issues have been discussed in detail in the following works: *Saints and Their Lives on the Periphery: Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c. 1000–1200)*, ed. by Haki Th. Antonsson and Ildar H. Garipzanov, *Cursor Mundi*, no. 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); and *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200)*, ed. by Ildar H. Garipzanov, *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, no. 26 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

a few exceptions from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards were the result of a creative process of remembrance and forgetting, which makes them less reliable sources for the early Christian period in Scandinavia, as can be exemplified by later written references to Armenian bishops in Iceland and to the unfinished pilgrimage of King Erik Ejegod. Hence, Garipzanov suggests that scholars of Eastern religious influences in Scandinavia should turn to other, non-narrative types of evidence — most importantly, early Christian legal sources, the evidence related to the dissemination of the cult of saints and, last but not least, archaeological data.

The next two articles in this volume are concerned with the concept of ‘Varangian Christianity’, as recently advanced by John Lind. This approach is an attempt to go beyond the established canons of both Scandinavists and Slavists, focusing rather on individuals’ adoption of faith and rite rather than on the advent of institutionalized church structures. This ‘grass-roots’ form of Christianity, nested within the group of Scandinavian merchants and warriors active on the periphery of the Christian world, was subjected to various influences, Byzantine as well as Western, with neither dominating the resulting religious behaviour.⁸ Henrik Janson’s essay provides a detailed overview of such diverse ecclesiastical influences on Scandinavians and Varangians from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, but the focal point of his narrative is the geographic concepts of ‘Scythia’ and ‘Scythians’ as applied in that period to Scandinavia and Eastern Europe and their inhabitants. Janson argues that these designations were not simply antiquated terms used by early medieval Latin and Byzantine authors, but may have designated a cultural sphere, including religious culture, stretching from Scandinavia to Rus’ and still existing in the first half of the eleventh century. Thus, Janson agrees with Lind that the religious culture of this ‘Scythia’ was characterised by the absence of institutionalised church organisation and by a broad array of Christian influences from adjacent regions, yet unlike Lind, he does not call this phenomenon ‘Varangian Christianity’ but rather ‘Scythian Christianity’.

The concept of ‘Varangian Christianity’ is further reflected upon in Oleksiy Tolochko’s article on tenth-century Rus’. He argues that the generally accepted image of an established Christian community of Kiev, with a significant section of the polity’s ruling elite already converted, is far too optimistic. It is based on fictitious accounts by the early twelfth-century author of the *Primary Chronicle*. The only authentic documents from tenth-century Kievan society, the Ruso-Byzantine treaties of 911 and 944, provide a much more sombre picture. It appears that the only place where a sizable Christian Rus’ community existed was

8 John Lind, ‘The Christianization of North and Eastern Europe c. 950–1050 — A Plea for a Comparative Study’, *Ennen & nyt*, 2004, no. 4, 1–18 <<http://www.ennenjanyt.net/4-04/lind.html>> [accessed 8 August 2011].

Byzantium, with the major incentive to adopt the new faith being service in the imperial army. Thus, the principal source of ‘Varangian Christianity’ in Rus’ was Byzantium, and Tolochko argues that with regard to Christianity, the Varangians, their northern origin notwithstanding, were viewed as part of the ‘Greek’ world of Byzantium. The evidence from the contemporaneous documents seems to be in accord with reflections on ‘Christianity before the Conversion’ in later sources, namely the *Primary Chronicle* of the twelfth century and the *Life of the Varangian Martyrs* composed at some point in the eleventh century. The latter, both in its explicit message and also in its choice of hagiographic models, typified the generally accepted belief that in pre-conversion Rus’ only the Varangians who ‘came from the Greeks’ had been introduced to Christianity, while the population at large still remained heathen.

This image of ‘Varangian Christianity’ linked to Byzantium seems to correspond to the evidence of cross-shaped pendants found in tenth-century Rus’, which is the main topic of Fedir Androshchuk’s essay. Hitherto, most archaeologists have agreed that such pendants deposited in graves in Scandinavia and Rus’ were probably the most obvious and uncontroversial markers of the Christian identity of individuals. Androshchuk challenges this view and emphasizes that cross-shaped pendants have been found almost exclusively in high-status female graves, along with other objects of social prestige. Therefore, he argues, such pendants were primarily social markers of wealth and status, even though their religious meaning might have been known to their owners. Looking for the possible origin of this practice, Androshchuk draws attention to the Byzantine custom, well documented by *De ceremoniis*, of an emperor dispersing small crosses of silver during the major religious feasts in Constantinople. The objects were thus tokens of rank and status and may have influenced the attitude of Varangians serving in or visiting Byzantium, which in turn must have affected the general attitude to similar objects in tenth-century Rus’ where their usage gradually became limited to high-ranking women. It would therefore appear that a segment of the Rus’ society most influenced by Christianity, the Varangians who served in the imperial army, did not consider small crosses to be an important marker of their faith and chose to display their religious affiliation visually by other means.

An additional set of questions present themselves concerning the inner religious lives of these new converts. How Christian were those Vikings who accepted formal baptism? What parts of the Christian doctrine did they understand and adopt? To what extent was their Christianity, both as a system of belief and as a practice, framed by their traditional beliefs? These are the questions that Elena Melnikova tries to answer in her article. As she points out, the circumstances in which Scandinavians usually adopted Christianity during the ninth and the tenth centuries—short visits to the courts of Christian rulers or negotiations in the wake of Viking attacks—would not contribute to a thorough instruction in Christian teaching. The version of Christianity that the Vikings were able to grasp

and assimilate was a simplified set of notions, the most important of which was the idea of a single Christian god, often identified as Christ, perceived as being a triumphant and potent ruler of heaven and earth, nature and humans. Other Christian figures, even the Virgin Mary, played minor roles and seem to have been absorbed into the religious culture much later. Searching for the causes of such obvious selectivity, Melnikova suggests that abstract Christian ideas were filtered through traditional Scandinavian models, with only those parts of the Christian doctrine that could be correlated with heathen concepts having a chance of being digested by the warrior culture of the Vikings. No doubt, Christian teaching was deliberately simplified for the new converts by preaching missionaries. However, the early stages of the Scandinavians' adoption of the new faith, Melnikova concludes, should be understood not as a Christian interpretation of heathenism but rather as a heathen interpretation of Christianity.

In his article, Fjodor Uspensky discusses the contacts between early Christian Scandinavia and Rus' in the late tenth and eleventh centuries via dynastic name-giving patterns. It is well known that a considerable number of Varangian names were used in early Rus' and some of them became traditional Rus' names. Conversion had no immediate affect on traditional naming patterns, and such onomastic exchange between ruling families in Scandinavia and Rus' continued into the eleventh century. In this early period, Christian names remained void of additional social and political meanings typical of traditional names, which resulted in the need for dual (one traditional and the other baptismal) princely names. Thus, at first, the gradual adoption of Christian names did not have a destructive impact on the pre-Christian naming traditions, and name-giving remained one of the most conservative cultural spheres.

While all other essays in this volume focus on the period of the tenth and eleventh centuries, Tatjana Jackson's contribution deals with later Old Norse narrative sources. She argues that religious differences between Scandinavia and Rus' were of little importance for the Icelandic saga writers and for the authors of Scandinavian itineraries and geographical works; for them, the Christian world remained an indivisible whole. Sagas style the Greek emperor as a Christian wise man and the undisputable ruler of Christendom. They tell how those Icelanders and Norwegians who had visited Byzantium preached Christianity in Eastern Europe, founded monasteries there and converted Rus' to Christianity. Twelfth-century accounts of pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem include admiring descriptions of Christian places in Constantinople. In contrast to early Rus' sources, sagas have also preserved information on Ruso-Scandinavian dynastic marriages from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Jackson states that the reasons for such attitudes among Old Norse narrators were the personal relationships of Scandinavian kings with Byzantine emperors and matrimonial links with Rus' princes, the prestige associated with service in the Varangian Guard and trade activity along the way from the Varangians to the Greeks.

Seen from this perspective, the statement in the *Primary Chronicle* (s.a. 983) regarding the first Christian martyr in Rus' at the time of the Conversion may be seen as being not so far removed from reality: 'бѣ же Варѡгъ то пришелъ изъ Грекъ . и держаше вѣру х̑еѡньску' (This Varangian had come from the Greeks and adhered to the Christian faith).⁹ Nevertheless, at the same time, the following essays provide this dictum with additional nuances and set it within wider religious, cultural and narrative contexts, thus bringing together the opposing sides of the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks, both in terms of the Christian influences in the historical period in question and in terms of bridging the gap between the separate traditions developed within the fields of medieval Scandinavian scholarship and Slavic studies.

⁹ *Lavrentevskaia letopis'*, ed. by A. F. Karskii, PSRL, 1 (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1926–28), col. 82.