



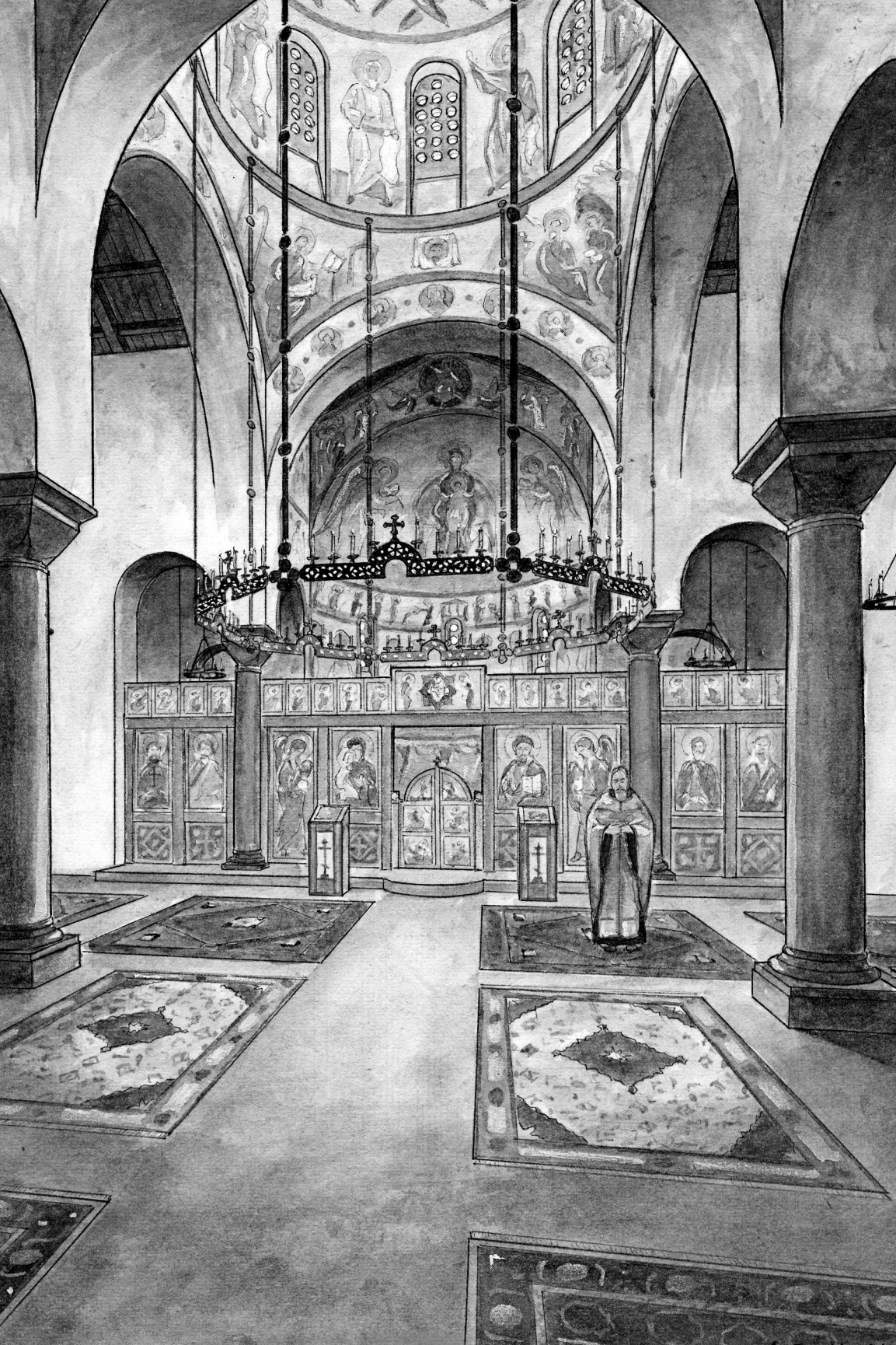
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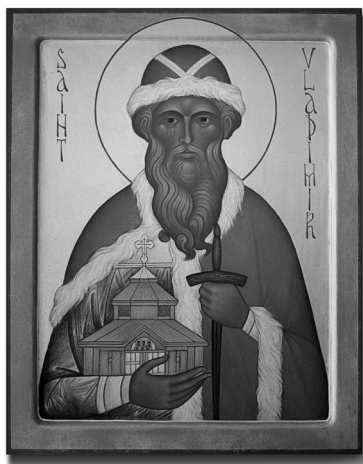
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“WE CANNOT FORGET THAT BEAUTY”

Notes on Sources for the Conversion of Rus’

by Mother Nectaria McLees

One of the founding histories of early Russia is the *Povesti Vremeninyhu Letu*, more commonly known in English as *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. Dating from 1113, the chronicle was compiled within living memory of people whose parents and grandparents had participated in the 988 baptism of the Russian people. While this account of foreign missionaries to the Kievan court and Prince Vladimir’s subsequent embassies to investigate their claims is often thought of as a beautifully stylized legend, careful historiography has uncovered documents that bring the vivid medieval narrative into sharper focus. Here *Road to Emmaus* presents a summary of those findings.

In addition to a handful of older Greek settlements on the Crimean Peninsula north of the Black Sea, the Christian minority before the conversion of Rus' was chiefly made up of Scandinavian traders, Kievan Rus' merchants, or Vikings who had converted to Christianity in Byzantium, the most notable being St. Vladimir's own grandmother, St. Olga (+969) and the Kievan protomartyrs Theodore and John (+983).

More than a century earlier, Patriarch Photios of Constantinople had written a letter to eastern patriarchs and bishops relating that the Bulgarians had turned to Christ in 863 and that the Rus' had followed suit. Although he recounts sending a bishop from Constantinople, the scope of the outreach is unknown, and there is no other record of this early attempt at conversion. Neither St. Olga's husband nor her son became Christian, while her grandson, the young Prince Vladimir, instituted a cult of Scandinavian and local deities centered on the god Perun, whose wooden statue Vladimir himself paid homage to in both Kiev and Novgorod. In time, doubts about the efficacy of the idols arose, and according to *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, Vladimir granted a series of audiences to visiting missionaries who hoped to imprint their beliefs on the young nation:

In 986, Vladimir was visited by Bulgars of Mohammedan faith, who said, "Though you are a wise and prudent prince, you have no religion. Adopt our faith, and revere Mahomet." Vladimir inquired what was the nature of their religion. They replied that they believed in God, and that Mahomet instructed them to practice circumcision, to eat no pork, to drink no wine, and, after death, promised them complete fulfillment of their carnal desires. "Mahomet," they asserted, "will give each man seventy fair women. He may choose one fair one, and upon that woman will Mahomet confer the charms of them all, and she shall be his wife. Mahomet 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. Vladimir 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 Rus'. We cannot exist without that pleasure."

Then came the Germans, asserting that they were 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.'" Vladimir 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 Vladimir answered, "Depart hence; our fathers accepted no such principle."

The Jewish Khazars heard of these missions, and came themselves saying, "We have learned that Bulgars 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 Vladimir inquired what their religion was. They replied that its tenets included circumcision, not eating pork or hare, and observing the Sabbath. The prince then asked where their native land was, and they replied that it was in Jerusalem. When Vladimir 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 prince 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 Vladimir a philosopher.... [*The unidentified Byzantine philosopher begins with a long critique of Islam and western Christianity....*]

...Then Vladimir remarked that the Jews had come into his presence and had stated that the Germans and the Greeks believed in him whom they crucified. To this the philosopher replied, "Of a truth we believe in him. For some of the prophets foretold that God should be incarnate, and others that he should be crucified and buried, but arise on the third day and ascend into heaven.... Vladimir then inquired why God should have descended to earth and should have endured such pain. The philosopher then answered and said, "If you

are desirous of hearing the story, I shall tell you from the beginning why God descended to earth." Vladimir replied, "Gladly would I hear it." Whereupon the scholar thus began his narrative: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth on the first day..."¹

[Here the philosopher goes on for many pages recounting the narrative of the Old Testament, and finishing with the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.]

... As he spoke thus, he exhibited to Vladimir 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 Vladimir sighed and said, "Happy are they upon the right, but woe to those upon the left!" The philosopher replied, "If you desire to take your place upon the right with the just, then accept baptism!" Vladimir took this counsel to heart, saying, "I shall wait yet a little longer," for he wished to inquire about all the faiths. Vladimir then gave the philosopher many gifts, and dismissed him with great honor.

In the following year, 987, Vladimir summoned together his boyars and the city elders, and said to them, "Behold, the Bulgars came before me urging me to accept their religion. Then came the Germans and praised their own faith; and after them came the Jews. Finally the Greeks appeared, criticizing all other faiths but commending their own, and they spoke at length, telling the history of the whole world from its beginning. Their words were artful, and it was wondrous to listen and pleasant to hear them. They preach the existence of another world. 'Whoever adopts our religion and then dies shall arise and live forever. But whosoever embraces another faith, shall be consumed with fire in the next world.' What is your opinion on this subject, and what do you answer?"

The boyars and the elders replied, "You know, O Prince, that no man condemns his own possessions, but praises them instead. If you desire to make certain, you have servants at your command. Send them to inquire about the ritual of each and how he worships God." Their counsel pleased the prince and all the people, so that they

¹ S.H. Cross and O.P. Sherbowetz-Wetzor (trans.), *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, pp. 96-111.

chose good and wise men to the number of ten, and directed them to go first among the Bulgars and inspect their faith.

The emissaries went their way, and when they arrived at their destination they beheld the disgraceful actions of the Bulgars and their worship in the mosque; then they returned to their country. Vladimir then instructed them to go likewise among the Germans, and examine their faith, and finally to visit the Greeks. They thus went into Germany, and after viewing the German ceremonial, they proceeded to Tsar'grad, where they appeared before the emperor.

He inquired on what mission they had come, and they reported to him all that had occurred. When the emperor heard their words, he rejoiced, and did them great honor on that very day. On the morrow, the emperor sent a message to the patriarch to inform him that a Russian delegation had arrived to examine the Greek faith, and directed him to prepare the church and the clergy, and to array himself in his vestments, so that the Rus' might behold the glory of the God of the Greeks. When the patriarch received these commands, he bade the clergy assemble, and they performed the customary rites. They burned incense, and the choirs sang hymns. The emperor accompanied the Rus' to the church, and placed them in a wide space, calling their attention to the beauty of the edifice, the chanting, and the pontifical services and the ministry of the deacons, while he explained to them the worship of his God. The Rus' were astonished, and in their wonder praised the Greek ceremonial. Then Emperors Basil and Constantine invited the envoys to their presence, and said, "Go hence to your native country," and dismissed them with valuable presents and great honor.

Thus they returned to their own country, and the prince called together his boyars and the elders. Vladimir then announced the return of the emissaries who had been sent out, and suggested that their report be heard. He thus commanded them to speak out before his retinue. The envoys reported, "When we journeyed among the Bulgars, we beheld how they worship in their temple, called a mosque, while they stand ungirt. The Bulgar 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 Germans, and saw

them performing many ceremonies in their temples; but we beheld no glory there.

Then we went 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 boyars spoke and said, "If the Greek faith were evil, it would not have been adopted by that wisest of all mortals, your grandmother Olga." Vladimir then inquired where they should all accept baptism, and they replied that the decision rested with him...

It is not through theology or apologetics, but the beauty of the service and inner conviction that persuade Vladimir's envoys of the truth of Orthodoxy so completely that they are ready to leave their native land. They in turn relate their experience to the prince with such compelling certainty that he replies by simply asking where they should now accept baptism.

In popular histories, and even at times among Orthodox themselves, this highly stylized account is regarded more as legend than fact. According to this line of reasoning, the motives for conversion were primarily political: that Prince Vladimir had used Emperor Basil II's need for military aid as a bargaining chip to pressure the emperor into giving his sister Anna Porphyrogenita in marriage to the prince; the emperor in turn required the Rus' to adopt Christianity before the marriage. This reading makes the initiative for baptism less a result of Vladimir's search for a true faith than a political necessity. Over the past century, however, historians have re-examined both Byzantine-Slavic texts and independent sources to weigh the question.

As expected, the Byzantine narratives (along with one Armenian and one Arabic text) refer to the conversion of the Rus' as the fulfillment of the condition set for Vladimir's marriage to Anna Porphyrogenita; there is no reason why these writers would have been aware of Vladimir's conversations with visiting missionaries. However, other documents, often from beyond the borders of Rus' and Byzantium, support the *Chronicle's* account of Vladimir's search.

Metropolitan Hilarion's "Sermon on Law and Grace"

The earliest Slavic source for Vladimir's conversion is the 1015 sermon, "On Law and Grace" by Metropolitan Hilarion, the first native Slav leader of the Orthodox Rus'. Hilarion's sermon is not historical, but celebratory, praising Vladimir for the baptism of Russia as if he indeed had instigated the conversion, and commending the prince's children and grandchildren for furthering the growth of the Church. Hilarion calls the Rus', "a new Christian people." No explanatory history was needed for the metropolitan's Russian Christian audience, for most had themselves participated in the mass baptism of 988. The later compilation of the *Russian Primary Chronicle* and several *Lives* of Vladimir followed naturally as eyewitnesses died off and a record of the events became necessary.

The Cambridge Document of the Khazarian Conversion

One interesting text, although not directly pertinent to Prince Vladimir's Rus', is a similar story to that of the later *Chronicle* account, which circulated among a semi-nomadic Turkic tribe from the Volga-Don steppe, the Jewish Khazars. In the eighth century, Khazar royalty and much of the aristocracy converted to Judaism, followed some years later by their people. A fragment of this account, thought to be a copy of a tenth-century Jewish Khazar letter written in Hebrew, was published in 1912 by the Cambridge University Library.

The most interesting part of the letter for our purposes is an account of how missionary representatives of Greeks from Byzantium, Arabs from Baghdad, and Jews from Khwarazm in Central Asia arrived at the Khazar court, urging the superiority of their respective faiths. In this instance, Judaism prevailed. When the king ordered that some mysterious books be brought from a cave (possibly one of the rock-built churches that dotted the eastern shores of the Black Sea), the texts proved to be the Biblical Pentateuch, the first five Books of Moses. The writings appealed to the Khazar ruler, and he and his court embraced Judaism. Although this account has no direct connection to early Rus', it does show that active missionary delegations from a variety of religions were eager to witness to their beliefs at pagan courts.

The Marvazi Version of the Rus' Conversion

In another independent document, the Khwarazmian tradition resurfaces in a direct reference to Rus' conversion in an account by the eleventh-century Muslim Persian writer and poet Kisai Marvazi. In the decades following the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism, the Khwarazam empire turned Muslim and, according to Marvazi, Rus' itself had become Christian in 923. (If this has any historical basis at all, it is perhaps a nod to Patriarch Photios' earlier unsustainable mission.) Then, Marvazi triumphantly and mistakenly announces:

...but when [the Rus'] entered the fold of Christianity, the faith blunted their swords, the door of their livelihood was closed to them, they returned to hardships and poverty, and their livelihood shrank. Then they desired to become Muslims, that it might be lawful for them to make raids and holy war, and so make a living by returning to their former practices. They therefore sent messengers to the ruler of Khwarazm, four kinsmen of their king; for they had an independent king called *V-ladimir* [Vladimir], just as the king of the Turks is called *khagan*, and the king of the Bulgars *btltu*. Their messengers came to Khwarazm and delivered their message. The Khwarazmshah was delighted at their eagerness to become Muslims, and sent someone to teach them the religious laws of Islam. So they were converted.²

Although Marvazi's insistence on Rus' early apostasy from Christianity and subsequent conversion to Islam under Vladimir is patently untrue, historians believe that there is nothing improbable in his statement that Vladimir's envoys came to Khwarazm. The fact that Marvazi knew Vladimir by name (though mistaking the prince's name for his title) makes plausible his report of the messengers' visit, which would have been remembered as a local event. The Bulgars themselves had sought religious instruction in Khwarazm, and the kingdom was a known destination on the Silk Route to China. It is also quite conceivable that Vladimir's emissaries would have turned to Central Asia to inquire about the Islamic faith, for Islam was not yet well-rooted

2 Nora Chadwick, *The Beginnings of Russian History*, p.70.

among the Bulgar tribes and Rus' had only recently concluded a war with the Bulgars. This embassy by Vladimir's "four kinsman" could have been an invitation for learned Muslims to come to the Rus' court to present their religion. It is also possible, but less likely, that Khwarazm was the destination of the subsequent visit of Rus' envoys to observe Islamic practice *in situ*, in which case the term "Bulgars" would have simply been the *Russian Primary Chronicle's* familiar designation for Muslims.

The Chronicle of Yahya Ibn Said

A final document pertaining to events surrounding the baptism is the chronicle of Yahya Ibn Said, a Christian Arab doctor who, fleeing persecution in his native Egypt, settled in Antioch around 1015 where he compiled a description of recent events in the Byzantine and Egyptian worlds. The doctor is a highly reliable chronicler whose accuracy in dates and systematization is so finely tuned that one historian has called it "a mania for precision." When in conflict with other Arab or Greek sources, Yahya's account is generally preferred.

Like the Byzantine sources, Yahya relates that Basil II, while struggling to put down a civil rebellion, has requested military assistance from Vladimir, prince of the Rus'. A marriage alliance is negotiated in which the prince is given the hand of Anna Porphyrogenita, the emperor's sister, on condition that he and the Rus' people are baptized. Basil sends his sister, along with metropolitans and bishops to carry out the baptisms, and Rus' troops are despatched to bolster Basil's attack on the rebels at Chrysopolis. Finally, Yahya notes that, after her marriage, Anna "built many churches in Rus'."

Historical Convergence

As Cambridge historian Jonathan Shephard points out, the *Russian Primary Chronicle's* eagerness to demonstrate God's hand at work among the Rus' does not mean that historians have to reject its chronology of Vladimir's search, "which is not only internally consistent, but corroborated by independent non-Slavic sources such as Marwazi." As a brilliant tactician, there is no reason why Vladimir's personal decision to accept Christianity for himself and his people could not have coincided with Byzantium's need for military aid and the opportunity to ask for Anna Porphyrogenita's hand in marriage. †

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