

Christianization of Rus'

Refers to the acceptance of Christianity (in its Eastern Orthodox form) by the political elite of the early Rus' principalities and its imposition upon the rest of the population at the end of the 10th century. The most influential decision in this process was made by Volodimir Sviatoslavich, Prince of Kiev (978–1015), to adopt Christianity and forcibly baptize those under his rule in the Dnepr River. His conversion is traditionally associated with the year 988 because the account of it in the *Rus' Primary Chronicle* is recorded under that year, but the sources point to either 987 or 989 instead.

This decision by Prince Volodimir was the result of a process of heightened activity by missionary monks and priests from Byzantium among the Slavs as well as increased military, diplomatic, and trade contact between the Rus' and Constantinople from the mid-9th century on. After the Muslim invasion stripped much of the Eastern provinces from the Empire, the Church in Constantinople began to attempt to balance the losses in the east with gains in the north. Such activity brought the Byzantine Church into competition with the Roman Church, which also was active in converting pagan Slavic peoples. The evidence for increased trade between Constantinople and Rus' at this time comes both from the *Rus' Primary Chronicle* and from archaeological evidence, such as greater numbers of Byzantine coins found in Rus' coin hoards dating from ca. 970 on (although Islamic dirhams and silver ingots remained the main monetary medium of exchange throughout this period).

Christianity appeared among the Rus' before Volodimir's conversion. The first evidence we have for it is from Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople (858–867), who mentions that within a few years after the Rus' attack on Constantinople in 860 some Rus' converted to Christianity. In addition, Theophanes Continuatus tells us that an archbishop sent by Patriarch Ignatius (847–858, 867–877) was received by the Rus' in 876. In the 10th century, three significant occurrences preceded Volodimir's conversion. First, in 911, negotiations in Constantinople over a

treaty between the Greeks and the Rus' allowed the Greek churchmen an opportunity to tell the Rus' envoys about Christianity. Second, the treaty of 944 between the Rus' and Greeks informs us that some Christians were among the Rus' envoys. Finally, Princess Olga, the regent for her son Sviatoslav, traveled from Kiev to Constantinople in the 950's and converted to Christianity at that time.

The Rus' Primary Chronicle has traditionally been the main source about the decision by Volodimir to convert, but now the general scholarly consensus is that most of the account appearing in the chronicle is a later invention. The chronicle's account is a compilation of four conversion stories tied loosely together. Three of these stories are similar to, and borrow from, stories told about the conversion of previous rulers in other countries, and thus can be considered literary commonplaces. One of the stories, however, finds independent confirmation in other sources of the time and may provide more reliable information.

In the first story, missionaries from Islam, Judaism, Western Christianity, and Eastern Christianity come to Kiev to convince Volodimir to convert to their particular religion. The most persuasive of these missionaries is a Greek philosopher who exegetically summarizes the Old and New Testaments as well as shows the prince an icon of the Last Judgment. But Volodimir decides "yet to wait a little." In the second story, Volodimir sends ten "good and wise men" to each of the major neighboring religions. The emissaries are most impressed with what they see in Constantinople—in particular, the sublime church architecture and the beauty of the church service—yet Volodimir continues to wait. In the third story, Volodimir captures the Crimean city of Kherson, after making a vow he will convert to Christianity if successful, and demands the sister of the Byzantine emperor in marriage, but he still does not convert. In the fourth story, Volodimir goes blind in Kherson. Anna (the sister of the Byzantine emperor), who has arrived to marry Volodimir, tells him that when he is baptized he will have his sight restored, which he then does and is cured from the affliction. Of these four stories, only the third story, concerning the capture of Kherson, has much value for trying to determine the events of 988–989. In

combination with contemporary Arabic, Armenian, and Byzantine sources, we can create this context for the Primary Chronicle's third story. Following a successful revolt by the Bulgarians and their defeat of the Imperial army in August 986, the Byzantine general Bardas Phokas rose up against the Emperor Basil II (976–1025) in September 987 in Asia Minor. Volodimir, in return for providing 6000 troops directly to the Empire and for taking action in the Crimea against those who supported the rebels, was promised by the Emperor his sister Anna in marriage, provided Volodimir converted to Christianity. Some scholars think it was at this point (in 987) that Volodimir was baptized. The army of Bardas Phokas was defeated at Abydos on April 13, 989, and Volodimir's capture of Kherson most likely occurred following that event, in the late spring or early summer of the same year. If we accept the contention of the compiler of the Rus' Primary Chronicle, then Volodimir's conversion occurred in Kherson shortly after Anna's arrival. The baptism of the residents of Kiev in the Dnepr River would then have happened later that summer. Arguing against a 989 date are three sources. The first is the *Prayer to Volodimir*, which states Volodimir captured Kherson in the third year, and died in the 28th year, of his conversion, thus dating his baptism to 987 and placing it presumably in Kiev. Interestingly, the *Prayer* is found together with a composition, the *Life of Volodimir*, that indicates he was baptized only after he took Kherson. Neither composition is found in a manuscript copy earlier than the 15th century and their authorship is unknown. The second source to date Volodimir's conversion to 987 is the *Tale and Passion and Encomium of the Holy Martyrs Boris and Gleb*, which, like the *Prayer*, states Volodimir died in the 28th year after his baptism. The third source (or, at least, 3 of its 19 extant manuscript copies), the *Reading about the Life and Murder of the Blessed Passion-sufferers Boris and Gleb*, attributed to an 11th-century monk, Nestor, provides the date 987 for Volodimir's baptism. In order to resolve this apparent contradiction in our source evidence some historians have suggested that 987 represents the year Volodimir began his period as a catechumen and 989 represents the year he was formally baptized.

The status of the early Rus' Church after Volodimir's acceptance of Christianity until 1037 has been a question in the historiography, whether Rus' constituted a metropolitanate on its own (with the metropolitan residing either in Kiev or Pereslav) or was subordinate to another metropolitanate such as that of Ohrid, or whether it occupied an autonomous status directly under the patriarch of Constantinople with an archbishop as its head. That question has been decided in favor of Rus' having its own metropolitan in Kiev from the beginning. After the conversion, well-established existing pagan rituals and practices survived, especially in rural areas, for centuries. Such residual paganism existing side-by-side with Christian rituals and practices has been described as a special phenomenon called *dvoeverie* ("dual belief"), but no solid evidence exists that paganism was any more prevalent here than in other areas of Eurasia that converted to Christianity.

The conversion of Rus' by Volodimir led to the formulation of a Christian religious culture in Rus' based on that of the Eastern Church. It also saw the introduction of writing (including an alphabet based on the Greek alphabet), literature (most of it being translations from the Greek), monastic communities, Byzantine-style art and architecture, and Byzantine Church law. Along with Scandinavian, steppe, and indigenous Slavic elements, this Byzantine influence contributed significantly to the cultural, political, and social amalgamation that constituted the early Rus' principalities.

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