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CHRISTIAN FORMS OF EXPRESSING BEAUTY
AND THE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF OLD RUS'
(11-13TH CENTURIES)
ACCORDING TO THE *HYPATIAN CODEX*¹

Vladimir the Great's Baptism of Rus' in 988 has opened a qualitatively new chapter in the history of the Eastern Slavonic state; this event accelerated the Christianisation of Old Rus' which took on a dual character: symbolic and practical. The symbolic aspect has crowned Rus' long-term multilayered contacts with Christianity, while the practical one has normalized relations with the Byzantine Empire and initiated the ripening of an Eastern Slavonic way of religious feeling. The adaptation to Christianity among different strata went at different speeds according to their literacy, habits, and temper. Elite, unlike the commons, was the most receptive to changes.

The cultural and social changes that have reached the Old Rus' under the influence of Christianity differed from those that had taken place in the Roman Empire in their kind, scope and pace. Constantinople and Rome have had centuries of philosophical, political and artistic tradition, while Kiev relied among other on the tradition of solar and ancestral cults, and on the spread of fortified towns. In Constantinople and Rome the dissonance between pagan and Christian aesthetics played into the hands of the pagan culture, while in Kiev the cultural gap was so extensive that it rendered any comparison point-

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less. At first the wealth of Christianity's form and substance seems to have overwhelmed everybody in the Old Rus' – from princes to commons. Perhaps, due to the multi-faceted character of Christianity, which lead to its incomprehension, the baptism at first introduced little significant change in the mentality of the nation.

The new religion sought to manifest itself in Slavonic environment and found the opportunities for it mainly in certain social and political practices, rather than in a private life. These practices included: political ideas, religious writing, monasticism, liturgy and religious art. Besides having their utilitarian dimension, all of them reflected some metaphysical considerations as well, though to a lesser degree. However, these practices lack a theoretical element – there are no dogmatic treatises, while monasticism (represented by Kievan Cave Monastery) was characterized mostly by simple asceticism [*The Paterik*, 145]. It seems that Rus' has accepted ascetic rather than rational aspect of Byzantine culture, if we are to follow the distinction suggested by Viktor Zhirovov [Живов, 76-77], yet aesthetically Rus' has been so visibly evolving as to have reached by the 11th century her Golden Age which allowed her capital Kiev to consciously challenge the Constantinople in cultural matters [Адам Бременский, *passim*]. Political ideas, religious writing, monasticism, liturgy and religious art in their non-utilitarian aspect belong to the realm of aesthetics broadly understood, assuming that any conscious activity which is expressing particular ideas and results in “metaphysical satisfaction” can be called aesthetic [Бычков, 8]. Understanding culture as an “aesthetic phenomenon” was typical of research method of Aleksey Losev 1893-1988), Dmitry Likhachov (1906-1999) and their disciples: Sergey Averintsev (1937-2004) and Viktor Bychkov (born 1942). They postulated that the culture of Old Rus' should be considered as a part of “disclosure of her aesthetic peculiarity” [Likhachev, 349; Аверинцев, 375]. From that point of view, the history of Old Rus' culture appears as a history of emergence of Eastern Slavonic aesthetic phenomena, attitudes, experiences. Christianity strongly activated and inspired this process. To what extent Christian forms of expressing beauty that have appeared in the Old Rus' culture especially after 988, influenced the formation of religious self-consciousness of the community? Below I will attempt to approximate a possible answer.

The art in a “sensuous form” [Hegel, *passim*], i.e. architecture, sculpture, sacral paintings, has been the expression of beauty that appears to have most strongly affected the religious and spiritual fields of experience and to have played the greatest role in popular education. That was not only because the

perception of the “sensuous” arts did not require reading or writing skills but also because those art forms, particularly architecture and iconography, could function as means for achieving a goal different from the object’s utilitarian purpose namely to provoke certain emotions and to lead to acceptance of a certain aesthetic, social and political outlook. Apparently, the erection of the sacred buildings in Old Rus’ was governed not only by practical but also by philosophic considerations. The most important cathedrals in Kiev, Novgorod, and Polotsk were dedicated to St. Sophia, Divine Wisdom of God, behind whose image stood a highly sophisticated theological and philosophical concept that defined the Greek Christianity. It entered the culture of Old Rus’ in part due to the employment of Greek clergy, builders, painters and architects. As Rus’ religious consciousness developed, the concept began to define the Eastern Slavonic Christianity as well. In their homilies and addresses the Rus’ first thinkers, the bookmen, have often and readily cited [*Послание*, 120; *Слово о законе и благодати*, 29] the biblical Divine Wisdom, which “hath builded her house, [...] hath hewn out seven pillars” [Prv 9,1]. At first, the levels of literacy rendered literary venues inefficient for dissemination of new and difficult concepts. However, the multiple inscriptions found by archaeologists on such objects as bricks, walls, panels, dishes, as well as birch bark letters, indicate that a significant portion of the populace was literate [Тихомиров, 263-269].

People’s ability to read and write had a purely utilitarian purpose limited to the vernacular, whereas Christian books written in literary (sacral) language – Russian recension of the Old Church Slavonic – may have been inaccessible to most of the society, even to some of the clergy who had to memorize liturgical texts. By contrast, the impact of the Christian art in its „sensuous form”, containing fragments of writings (such as inscriptions on the icons), was definitely greater. The chronicles, which in Old Rus’ have been a typical piece of her literary and political culture, are one of the sources that tell us what status and function the Christian graphic and plastic arts have possessed. The writing of chronicles played a quite important social role: it cultivated the spirit of the Russian history, suggested a certain morality and social attitude (towards religion, authorities, neighbours). This role, however, affected mostly the elite. The commons in similar situation relied on the oral epic poems, which contained the assessment of events and personalities from a popular point of view [Рыбаков, 484]. Historiosophical premises set up the framework for the practical and spiritual culture of Old Rus’. It seems that chronicles (and partly oral epic poems) can form the foundation and a pretext for inferences

that reach further than intentions of their creators. The XVth century's *Hypatian codex* relates the history of Old Rus' from her origin up to the year 1292. The chronicler paid attention to events that took place in the largest centers of culture and trade in the Old Rus': Kiev, Novgorod, Vladimir, Smolensk, Pereyaslavl, Suzdal, Galich. The temples built in those towns were the most prominent and have functioned as the environment for dissemination of ideas. In the churches the rulers inaugurated and finished their rule [RPCh 6583/1075; KCh 6647/1139; G-VCh 6772/1264], celebrated victory over enemies [RPCh 6544/1036], gathered their greatest treasures: books, icons, sacramentals, throne and princely robes [KCh, 1185/6691], assembled the clergy, the best artists, bookmen and architects. The church was above all associated with power. The *Kievan chronicle* relates that whoever occupies "the throne of his father and great father" in St. Sophia cathedral in Kiev will *de facto* rule [KCh 6658/1150]. The connection between the sacred place and the authority has not been new for Rus'; it existed since pagan times and so was intuitively accepted by all and sundry. That's why not only the elite but the lower classes could see the temples as exceptional places that arouse one's curiosity as well as alarm and maybe even fear towards something strange and not completely familiar.

Beauty in its corporal, tangible, sensory dimension has converted itself into aesthetic, metaphysical and ethical experiences of Grand Prince Vladimir. The change in his outlook after his baptism was neither superficial, nor insincere; long-known for his lust, aggression and lack of restraint [RPCh 6523/1015], he transformed his life under the impact of the Christian tenets. Jacob the Monk in his *Memory and Laudation to Vladimir* [*Память и похвала*, 315-326] and the German chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg in his *Chronicle* [*The Chronicon* VII, 74] recall the story of charity, generosity, and wisdom unprecedented in the pagan period of the ruler's life. However, the charity of the Grand Prince did not extend itself to his pagan brethren and their customs. *The Russian Primary Chronicle* gives many examples of that [RPCh 6496/988]. Vladimir ordered people to accept the baptism, having built the Church of St. Basil in the place where Perun statue had stood. The change of customs did not go well with the inhabitants of Kiev: some of them refused to listen to the priests sent by Vladimir [Татищев, 63].

Thus, Vladimir faced the task much more difficult than diplomatic altercations and formal Baptism, the task of winning over his people's soul and of "educating" [Карпов, p. 276] them in Christian piety. Psychologically, the change of habits is often a difficult and painful process; it certainly did not

help that it was associated with a foreign force since the first metropolitans, architects, builders and painters were of Greek origin. In the chronicle record for the year 6499/989 we can read that Vladimir “lived in the Christian faith. With the intention of building a church dedicated to the Holy Virgin, he sent and imported artisans from Greece” [RPCh 6497/989; *Степенная Книга*, 111]. He has adorned it with icons and liturgical wares which he had seized from Kherson (bringing along even the construction materials) and has installed there a Greek priest, Anastasius of Kherson [RPCh 6497/989; Капреп, 55]. Above all, the Greeks were drawn upon for erection of the stone churches; construction of the wooden ones could safely rely on the local talents [Капреп, 93-95].

Thus, the Christian architecture could not fully reflect the temper and mentality of the people [Алпатов, 70]. Emotions that proximity of the church evoked in the people had little in common with the realm of a religious and aesthetic excitement; the people gathered inside and around the churches for the sake of potential practical reward, as the chronicler reports [RPCh 6623/1115]. Moreover, a great deal of graffiti found on church walls with inscriptions like “[X] wrote this” indicate that not everyone felt pious within them [Franklin, 236]. This seems to be less related to a lack of artistic sensitivity or vandalism, but rather due to a curiosity and an urge to use a newly acquired skill. In pagan culture the art was an acknowledged and appreciated trade. Dmitry Aynalov advances the argument that a group of people employed in artistic production (that is in architecture, painting and sculpture) existed in Rus’ from the time immemorial [Айналов, 2]. Vladimir the Great, in the pagan period of his life, emphasized the artistic ornamentation of paganism [RPCh 6488/980]. The sculpture thus formed the mainstream of the aesthetic development of the pagan Rus’, though a pagan religious architecture, i.e. sanctuaries and shrines (*kapishcha, trebishcha*), probably did exist as well. This is why many researchers (e.g. Georgy Wagner, Mikhail Alpatov, Nikolay Voronin) maintained that the carved wood sculptures and reliefs of the churches, such as Cathedral of Saint Demetrius in Vladimir on Klyazma river, had been to a significant extent independent, reflecting original Eastern Slavonic features. It did not copy Byzantine samples and standards but drew upon its native popular culture and the content of oral epic poems [Вагнер, 423; Лазарев, 412; Воронин, 43].

At first the people did not fully identify themselves with the change of religion, and resented Vladimir’s actions [*Память и похвала*, 320]. They stayed indifferent to the destruction of Christian sanctuaries, e. g. during the

burning of a splendid church in Vladimir [KCh 6691/1183] or the church of Holy Virgin in Rostov. On some occasions the pagans destroyed the Christian buildings by hands, as in the case of Novgorod's Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord church during the violent attempts at conversion [Татищев, 112-113]. Yet, mere two centuries later the people ascribe the victory over Cumans to The Church of the Tithes in Kiev [KCh 6680/1172; 6679/1171]. In the chronicle we can find further evidence and examples of various behavioral attitudes towards Christianity. The positive ones mostly concern the elites, in whose case the adoption of Christianity went considerably smoother but still failed to be joyful [RPCh 6496/988].

The familiar important passage of *the Russian Primary chronicle* on the spread of Christianity and culture speaks of a multitude of churches and people, earnest Christians [RPCh 6545/1037]. According to the chronicler's argument, the growing number of Christians is the result of the efforts of Vladimir's son, Yaroslav the Wise. Yaroslav set up the churches in towns and villages instructing the priests to teach people. His culminating event was the erection and consecration of St. Sophia cathedral in Kiev, "decorated with silver and gold and liturgical cups" [RPCh 6545/1037]. The chronicler does not mention mosaics and frescos that adorned the sanctuary since the XIth century, although he does refer to the icon of St. Mary: "Izyaslav has come to the St. Sophia [cathedral] and has bowed to [the icon of] St. Mary" [KCh 6654/1147]. Unlike mosaics and frescos the icon from the St. Sophia cathedral did not survive. It is worth noting that the pre-Mongolian iconography is represented by twenty seven surviving icons including the icon of Our Lady of Pechersk that belongs to the artistic culture of Kiev [*Живопись домонгольской Руси*, 316-356; Кондаков (a), 316-356]. Apart from that the Kievan style is reflected in the icon of Our Lady of Kupyatichy that is the image of St. Mary on a copper cross of Korsun type, as well as the icon of Dormition of the Mother of God from Kievan Cave Monastery, which has been regarded lost. The icon of Dormition of the Mother of God from Kievan Cave Monastery, which was lost in 1941, had been seen by Nikodim Kondakov [Кондаков (b), 109-110]. Thus, Kiev did have its own iconographic school but very few samples of it survived unlike those of Vladimir, Suzdal, or Novgorod [Лазарев, 47].

An icon occupied the most holy, precious, and important place in a temple. A church was defined through the icons it held [RPCh 6544/1036; KCh 6669/1160; KCh 6683/1175; KCh 6688/1180; G-VCh 6767/1259; G-VCh 6768/1260]. The icons were the objects of highest devotion to highest devotion; they were thought to protect [KCh 6693/1185; G-VCh 6743/1235], to

counsel [KCh 6705/1197] and to cause miracles [KCh 6681/1173]. It seems therefore that icons belonged to the positive element of Christianity that affected the imagination of former pagans the most, in contrast with Greek clergy and a forced change of customs, which formed the negative element.

The Kievan St. Sophia Cathedral with its icons, frescos and mosaics has become the center of the city (and its highest point) not only in the geographic sense but in the sacral and symbolic sense as well (St. Sophia has symbolized the victory of Yaroslav the Wise over Pechenegs), though mainly for princes and their entourage: the *Kievan chronicle* often mentions the princes (and never the commons) paying tribute to St. Sophia of the Kiev Cathedral (as well as to the Holy Virgin of the Church of the Tithes) and their oaths on the cross, which were regarded as most solemn and binding [KCh 6659/1151; 6660/1152].

However, the chronicler confines his description to a praise of the beauty and splendor of the church, while not informing us what was its real, not only intended, function in society and its scale of impact. Yet modern historical research helps to fill the gap: the splendor, the imposing solidity and the harmony of the temples combined with the ease and directness of their impact upon their beholders have softened the cultural shock and could form a link that facilitated transition from the pagan to the Christian outlook. Even more so since Old Rus' architecture has been neither a slavish copy of the Byzantine template, nor a "parochial version of Byzantine architecture". According to Pavel Rappoport Old Rus' had by the mid-11th century worked out her own artistic solutions independent from Byzantine ones and by the mid-12th century has had her own architectural schools: Kievan, Novgorodian, Polotskian, Galician, and Vladimir-Suzdalian [Алпатов, 70-73; Рappoport, 26-29, 68]. Old Rus' artistic solutions appealed to Slavonic sensitivity, which seems to have had a soothing and inviting effect on people and to a degree reduced perception of Greeks as foreign and different. The pagan past has not been forgotten; it went on living even among the members of the Christianized elite: a Kievan chronicler recalls pagan rites of passage commonly observed, such as the first haircut, the first mount on a horse, and funeral lament [KCh 6700/1192]. So, within the culture of "dual faith" the Christianity and Paganism ideologically co-existed but aesthetically Christianity succeeded to advance upon, dominate over and absorb the pagan art. Subsequently, the Christian art had to become an important factor that shaped a new outlook and an epistemological perspective, making it possible with the passage of time for the Christian articles of faith to be truly believed.

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CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIE FORMY WYRAŻANIA PIĘKNA
A RELIGIJNA SAMOŚWIADOMOŚĆ
DAWNEJ RUSI XI-XIII WIEKU
W PRZEKAZIE KODEKSU HIPACKIEGO

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi próbę określenia roli chrześcijańskiej estetyki w formowaniu się religijnej samoświadomości Dawnej Rusi (XI-XIII wieku). Na podstawie danych źródłowych pochodzących z *Kodeksu Hipackiego* i innych zabytków piśmienniczych oraz ustaleń uczonych (paleografów, archeologów, historyków, lingwistów) staram się zaakcentować jeden aspekt ewolucji kulturalno-religijnej Dawnej Rusi – aspekt estetyczny. Wydaje się, że to właśnie chrześcijańska estetyka w formie „zmysłowego oglądu” tj. architektura, ikonografia i rzeźba odegrała istotną rolę w procesie podporządkowywania się światopoglądu pogańskiego chrześcijańskiemu.

Słowa kluczowe: estetyka; Ruś Kijowska; architektura; ikona; piśmienność.

CHRISTIAN FORMS OF EXPRESSING BEAUTY
AND THE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF OLD RUS' (11-13TH CENTURIES)
ACCORDING TO THE *HYPATIAN CODEX*

S u m m a r y

This paper discusses role of Christian aesthetics for defining the religious identity of Old Rus'. Attempting a multidisciplinary approach, it follows the *Hypatian Codex* to trace the challenges and difficulties encountered by the introduction, with the Baptism of 988, of a new faith. Having reviewed historical surveys and sources and drawn upon the studies in paleography, archaeology, linguistics, and art history, the author emphasizes aesthetic aspect of Rus' cultural evolution. In conclusion the paper maintains that the visual arts, such as architecture and sacral paintings, have played an essential role in the protracted process of absorption and subordination of the pagan tradition.

Key words: aesthetics; Kievan Rus'; architecture; icon; literacy.