Introduction

The cultivation of divine favour in battles is as ancient as warfare itself. Along with readying weapons, formulating strategy and securing supplies, military leaders from ancient times to the present day have striven to ensure the spiritual preparedness of their troops and the intercession of the god or gods they worship. Such rituals have, naturally, taken a variety of forms, reflecting the religious beliefs of the societies in question. Many modern armies employ chaplains from several religious traditions, even if the state they defend is officially secular. The work of these priests, rabbis and imams is seen as crucial to the maintenance of morale, and it has parallels in the earliest accounts of warfare. Homer, for example, describes the sacrifices and religious rites performed prior to battle by both Trojans and Achaeans, as well as the effectiveness of these rituals in securing the protection of various gods.1 Many members of the Greco-Roman pantheon had a keen interest in warfare and could be expected to intercede on behalf of favoured armies and individuals, ensuring that the practices of offering sacrifices and visiting temples before and after battles remained common throughout antiquity. Indeed, such was the importance of these rituals within the Roman army that those who refused to participate, such as Christians, might risk death. Although some accounts of the massacres of Christian soldiers were probably embellished by later scribes, there is no doubt that many followers of the new faith were persecuted for their non-conformist behaviour, particularly starting during the reign of Diocletian.2 A number of these hapless men went on to become, as military saints, the Christian answer to the gods they rejected.

1 Particularly interesting are Homer’s accounts of ineffectual appeals to gods, such as Agamemnon’s sacrifice to Zeus following his deceptive dream and the unsuccessful plea of the Trojan noblewomen to Diana. Homer, The Iliad, trans. and ed. A. T. Murray, 2nd edn, rev. William F. Wyatt, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library 170 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), i, pp. 90, 92, 294, 296. Paris, on the other hand, was saved from Menelaus thanks to Aphrodite’s intervention (p. 166).
2 For a general introduction to the Christian experience in the Roman army see John Helgeland, ‘Christians in the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine’, in ANRW, ed. Hildegard
The slaughter within the army’s own ranks ceased with the decree of religious toleration issued by Constantine I and Licinius in 313. The new privileged status of Christianity did not, however, mean an end to the cultivation of divine favour, but merely a different approach to the problem. Constantine encouraged the spread of Christianity within the army and gave Christian soldiers leave to attend Sunday services, while priests began to accompany them on campaigns during his reign. Some of the religious observances he instituted, such as the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy and the recitation of special prayers before battle, seem to have continued more or less unchanged for hundreds of years in the Byzantine army. Other practices evolved over time, reflecting the changing contours of eastern Christianity as a whole. In the wake of the renewed popularity of the cult of saints following Iconoclasm, for example, soldiers, officers and rulers began to direct prayers toward certain martyrs who were believed to have special powers to intercede in war. Their veneration became a distinguishing feature of middle and late Byzantine warfare, differing in style and focus from earlier devotional practices but expressing the same basic urge of soldiers to seek the protection of divine patrons.

A testament to the strong appeal of these saints was their enthusiastic reception beyond the borders of the empire. Despite its evolution in the East Roman military, religious and cultural context, the middle Byzantine tradition of divine patronage in warfare took root quickly in foreign soil and provided a model for the development of new intercessors in war. In particular, the military saints became the favoured protectors of the princely clan of Kievan Rus following the official conversion of the principality to Christianity in the late tenth century. Their veneration is attested in some of the earliest sources from Rus, where their cults continued to develop in entirely new circumstances. Like their Byzantine counterparts, the princes of Rus directed prayers toward their patrons before battle and built churches in their honour in gratitude for victories. But they also introduced changes to the traditions they inherited, cultivating a distinctive form of veneration which included both ancient saints and members of their own family: the martyred brothers Boris and Gleb. Victims of fratricidal strife following the death of their father in 1015, these princes became the first native saints of Rus. They gained a widespread following
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by the end of the eleventh century and were particularly venerated in princely circles. Although Slavonic and Scandinavian traditions can be detected in their early cult, it was also profoundly influenced by the military saints in the Byzantine mould, who had many of the same protective capabilities which the princes recognised in their kinsmen. The role of the ancient saints as models for Boris and Gleb shows the vitality of middle Byzantine ideas about divine patronage in warfare and their importance within the shared religious culture of the Commonwealth.

The saints venerated in this manner, whether in Rus or Byzantium, are referred to variously: the terms ‘warrior saints’, ‘holy warriors’, ‘soldier saints’, ‘military martyrs’ and ‘military saints’ can all be found in studies of the subject. The preferred appellation in the present study is ‘military saints’ because it implies a connection between a saint and the army rather than combat in the abstract. However, this subject does not benefit from excessive hair-splitting, and it is recognised that the terms are nearly synonymous. More important than the modern terms for these saints is the recognition that none of them is a translation of a phrase found in Byzantine texts. Indeed, the Greek sources show none of the diversity of modern scholarship in their references to this group. Although the term *martyroi hoi stratelatoi* (martyr-generals) is known from middle Byzantine works, it appears only rarely and – crucially – only in the plural. Otherwise, the individual members are usually referred to simply as martyrs, even when depicted dressed in armour and carrying weapons. The Byzantine nomenclature illustrates two vital points which will be discussed in the following chapters: the importance of a group identity to the saints’ military cults and their continued and related veneration as martyrs. Although the term ‘military saint’ will be used throughout this work for the sake of convenience, it must also be remembered that this is a modern appellation which does not accurately reflect Byzantine usage.

However one designates them, the veneration of military saints was one of many possible solutions to an eternal and universal problem. Like the employment of army chaplains in modern times and the offering of sacrifices in the ancient world, the invocation of saints in time of war sheds light on the way in which leaders have sought the cooperation of divine figures in their military undertakings. As such, their cults offer a unique source of insight into the relationship between warfare and religious belief in the societies in question – two subjects widely researched individually but relatively unexplored in their intersection. The phenomenon of military sainthood elucidates, moreover, some of the subtle but important differences between religious practices in Byzantium and Rus, showing
how these societies produced distinct traditions of divine patronage using similar raw materials. The present study seeks to explain the process by which three unrelated martyrs – George, Demetrios and Theodore – were first established as a corps of heavenly protectors for the Macedonian emperors and the changes which their cults later underwent in Rus, culminating in the inclusion within their ranks of Boris and Gleb. In particular, analysis is devoted to the cults of the saints in late antiquity, the circumstances which led to their selection as a group of patrons in war in the tenth century and the combination of the ideals of martyr and warrior which characterised their joint imperial cults. The second half of the investigation concerns the fate in Rus of the martyr-warrior ideal which developed in middle Byzantium. In particular, it will be argued that the military saints provided a template for the nascent cult of Boris and Gleb beginning in the late eleventh century. This hitherto unacknowledged Byzantine influence explains a number of peculiarities in the brothers’ cult which have puzzled previous scholars.

Military sainthood in general, and its varying forms in Byzantium and Rus in particular, are not widely researched topics. In 1908 Hippolyte Delehaye published a selection of Greek hagiographic texts about Theodore Stratelates, Theodore Teron, Demetrios, Prokopios, Merkourios and George, with accompanying analytical articles, in his book *Les légendes grecques des saints militaires.* Delehaye’s choice of subjects indicates a recognition of this small group of saints as the most popular within a somewhat larger corps which was venerated in imperial and military circles, and he designated this inner circle the état-major. As a study of hagiography, the book concentrates on the age of the individual texts, their manuscript traditions and their value as historical sources. Each saint and his vitae are treated individually, and little attention is given to the group’s development as a collective force or its role within the life of the Byzantine court and army. Questions of this nature are addressed in only slightly more detail in Christopher Walter’s 2003 book *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition.* This study discusses a large number of saints in separate sections, which provide historical and art historical overviews of their cults. Walter devotes a large portion of the book to the état-major, analysing literary and artistic sources from Byzantium and the


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Balkans, spanning the period from late antiquity until the Ottoman conquests and beyond. Like Delehaye, his focus is on the individual saints, and he discusses their role as a group of comrades-in-arms only briefly. Although Walter recognises that the saints’ military cults were particularly prominent only from the tenth century onward, their continued importance as martyrs and the relationship between the two attributes receive little attention. He attempts, moreover, to account for every saint who is described as a soldier in an effort to develop a ‘characterisation’ of the warrior saints. This approach necessitates the inclusion of dozens of obscure figures who are described in only one or two sources and about whose cults almost nothing is known, meaning that little substantive analysis can be offered about them.

The individual approach is also adopted by David Woods, whose website, ‘The Military Martyrs’ (www.ucc.ie/milmart/index.html), offers many resources on these saints and their cults, as well as Christianity in the Roman army in late antiquity. The site features a list of twenty-two saints and groups of saints with links to information about their hagiography, iconography and cults. Again, the saints are studied for the most part as individuals, and the problem of their dual status as martyrs and warriors receives no special attention. Most other book-length studies in the field discuss the cult of only one saint in the context of religious history and/or the publication of primary sources. The same is true of shorter studies, which also tend to concentrate on the literature or artwork related to a single military saint, usually within a single culture. This focus is justifiable, as each member of the état-major had a large individual following, and these works have made significant contributions to the understanding of their cults. On the other hand, in most studies the saints’ prominence as patrons in war overshadows their continued role as martyrs, a feature which remained crucial to their cults. Moreover,

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the relative abundance of sources related to each individual saint seems to have discouraged investigation into their joint veneration, and their mutual associations have for the most part been neglected.

Although the present study will not be able to account for every aspect of each saint’s cult, it will attempt to shed light on areas which most earlier works have overlooked: their veneration in Byzantium as a joint force of martyr-warriors and their influence on the cult of Boris and Gleb. Rather than considering every saint who was a soldier, or even just the prominent victims of the persecutions in the Roman army, analysis will focus on a small group of saints, even more select than the état-major – George, Demetrios and Theodore (later joined by Boris and Gleb) – whose military patronage was most coveted by the middle Byzantine emperors and Rus princes. Although these rulers certainly venerated other holy warriors, the relative abundance of sources related to this group of saints shows that they were by far the most popular. Hagiographic and historical works mention them more often than the other members of the état-major, and portraits of large groups of military saints, such as the ivory carvings studied in Chapter 3, almost always include them, whereas the identities of the other saints are much less predictable. Even if other saints often fought alongside this inner circle, its members formed a distinct corps of patrons which the Byzantine emperors and certain Rus princes seem to have recognised, unlike the broader designation of military martyr. Analysis of the cults of this select group in the context of courtly and military life thus sheds light on the changing concerns of their adherents about divine protection in warfare.

One of these changes was the saints’ influence on, and association with, the Rus saints Boris and Gleb. As in the case of the military saints, the evidence related to the martyred brothers is relatively abundant and they are the subject of vast amounts of scholarship. Most of this work, however, does not discuss their military qualities, much less their connections with the holy warriors, despite the fact that many early sources acknowledge them as the protectors of the clan and make connections between the brothers and the older saints. With some notable exceptions, study of

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6 There were two military saints by the name of Theodore, one known as Teron (‘the Recruit’) and the other as Stratelates (‘the General’). As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the General’s cult seems to have been an outgrowth of that of the Recruit, and their cults were almost identical. When discussing them in general terms, they will therefore be treated as a single saint, following the example of Byzantine and Rus icons, which often label a portrait of a single bearded warrior simply ‘Theodore’. The feast days of all members of the état-major and other military saints mentioned in the text are given in Appendix 1.
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Boris and Gleb’s cult has traditionally centred on close textual analysis of the three major hagiographic works devoted to them, with emphasis on establishing a chronology of the works (a problem which remains unsolved). On the other hand, some less scrutinised but equally informative sources, including the liturgical offices and readings for the brothers’ feast days, are only beginning to receive substantial scholarly attention. Also relatively unexplored is the brothers’ rich and varied iconography. The few studies which have appeared on this topic tend to restrict themselves to a single medium and/or argue that the brothers’ portraiture developed in strictly defined stages – an unconvincing proposal given the lack of dateable works. In conjunction with other evidence, however, iconography provides an important window on the veneration of Boris and Gleb and their similarities with the military saints. As in the case of the holy warriors, it would be beyond the scope of this study to comment on all the surviving evidence, literary and artistic, connected with Boris and Gleb’s cult. In particular, the thorny issue of the age of the sources will not be addressed. Instead, representative evidence in all media will be used to analyse the brothers’ place in the religious, political and military milieu of pre-Mongol Rus, and to argue that some of the most important aspects of their cult developed under the influence of the Byzantine military saints.

The present work thus differs in scope and objectives from previous treatments of the military saints and Boris and Gleb, but it has benefited from their varied approaches, systematic investigations and publications of primary sources. The hagiographic tradition provides some of the most basic and essential information about the cult of any saint, and Delehaye’s study brings together important Greek sources about the most prominent holy warriors. Additional scholarship on individual and groups of texts has helped round out the picture, clarifying aspects of the manuscript tradition and placing them in historical context. Paul Lemerle’s study of the miracle stories of Demetrios, Karl Krumbacher’s edition of early texts about George and Constantine Zuckerman’s work on the miracles of Theodore, among others, have addressed many questions about the origins and development of the saints’ Byzantine cults. Although the dating of most of the works remains imprecise at best, the general contours of their evolution are fairly clear: the fame of the holy warriors meant that literary sources about them were relatively varied and plentiful, and hence informative about changes over time in their veneration. The

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9 Previous scholarship on Boris and Gleb will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.
already substantial corpus of the military saints’ hagiography was extensively reworked in the tenth century, and they appear in most liturgical calendars as well as countless hymns, liturgical poems and miracle stories. Although not all of these works have been published, many of the major sources are accessible. The large number of texts and the repetitive nature of many of them mean, however, that they cannot all be studied individually. The focus will be, rather, on the changes over time in the emphasis of the works, especially those composed by and for members of the imperial court.

Rus written sources about the military saints consisted, for the most part, of translations of Greek originals which seem to have circulated almost exclusively within the Church. As in Byzantium, accounts of the saints’ lives, deaths and posthumous exploits appeared in liturgical calendars and miracle stories, but the number of surviving works from Rus is smaller and less varied than the Greek corpus. Publication of these texts was, moreover, lamentably unenthusiastic during the twentieth century. Some of the more famous miracle stories received a fair amount of attention, but following the appearance of V. Jagič’s critical edition of a number of eleventh-century mineia texts in 1886, no other works of this type were published until 2010. Original manuscripts of Rus hagiographic and liturgical calendars were therefore consulted, although not all of the surviving manuscripts were accessible. Happily, the state of affairs is much different with the texts relating to Boris and Gleb. D. I. Abramovich’s authoritative edition of the relevant works brings together both hagiographic and liturgical texts, giving variants for each. Rus chronicles, likewise published in critical editions as part of the Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles (PSRL), also provide a wealth of information (albeit often indirect) about the veneration of both the military saints and Boris and Gleb.

10 See, for example, D. S. Likhachev, ed., SKK (Leningrad: Nauka, 1987), pp. 144–6, 260–5, 268–73 on the Rus versions of some of the hagiographic texts relating to George, Demetrios and the Theodores.
11 V. Jagič, ed., MSON (St Petersburg: Imp. Academiae scientiarum socius, 1886). The research for this study was completed too early to make use of the first volume of a critical edition of the prolog, a text which is discussed further in Chapter 4: Slaviano-russkii prolog po drevneishim spiskam: Sinaktr’, ed. V. B. Kryško et al. (Moscow: Azbukovnik, 2010–), 1 (2010).
Sources related to the cults of the military saints are not limited, however, to hagiographic and liturgical texts. As Walter’s book demonstrates, study of the saints’ iconography is no less essential to understanding their cults. Depictions of the holy warriors are relatively plentiful thanks to their popularity. These works were created in a wide range of media, including frescoes, enamels, seals, coins and various types of icons. Taken as a group, these objects fit rather uncomfortably under the label ‘artistic sources’. Aside from being figurative, most of them have little to do with art in the modern sense of the word. Icons, frescoes and pectoral crosses had a purely devotional purpose, while seals and coins had important social and economic functions. Only a small minority of the objects under study, such as the luxury enamels produced for members of the Rus and Byzantine courts, had more strictly decorative functions, although their depiction of saints still gave them religious connotations. For lack of a better term, however, these items will be described as artistic sources, although special attention will be devoted to the specific role of each type of item under study.

However they are described, they are of great importance: even more so than literary works, these sources shed light on the types of veneration the saints enjoyed and by which sectors of the population. Careful analysis of the saints’ portraiture can reveal the nature of their mutual associations as well as tendencies, in different places and at different times, to depict them as martyrs or warriors. Because it survives in so many media, however, the iconographic evidence is widely scattered. Many works languish unpublished in archives, and those which have been published tend to appear with other items of the same medium, rather than other depictions of military saints. Assembling such works for study is therefore challenging, and there is often no way to ensure that samples of items in a given medium are representative. Moreover, the distinctive function of each medium within the society in question needs to be given adequate attention, meaning that different forms of interpretation must be applied. Finally, artistic works are often in worse states of disrepair than manuscripts. Damage to the objects themselves, as well as inadequate reproductions, can hinder attempts at analysis. But despite the difficulties associated with them, artistic sources provide vital clues about the cults of the military saints and constitute a large portion of the evidence for this work. Details such as the saints’ portrayal alone or in groups, the attributes they hold and the clothing they wear can reveal as much about their veneration as the written accounts of their lives and miracles.
Another major body of evidence under consideration is non-hagiographic written sources about both the military saints and the role of religion in warfare. These sources provide important information about the manner in which the military saints were believed to intercede in battle and the status of the Byzantine army itself as a sacred force. Historical writings and chronicles describe posthumous appearances by the military saints in Byzantium and Rus, giving hints about perceptions of their powers and the role they played in combat. Military treatises, meanwhile, shed light on attitudes within the upper echelons of the Byzantine army towards the role of religious faith in warfare. Although these writings mention the military saints only rarely, their descriptions of religious rituals and practices illustrate the prominence of the idea of warfare as a sacred undertaking. The vision of the Byzantine army as a holy force of martyrs fighting the enemies of God was, it will be argued, a contributing factor in the rise to prominence of the military saints – whose triumph of martyrdom made them fitting leaders of the sacred army. Unfortunately, military treatises do not seem to have been composed or copied in Rus, meaning that much less information is available about the theoretical aspects of warfare among the East Slavs. Although other types of sources offer scattered hints, questions about the role of religion in Rus armies must remain for the most part unanswered.

The cults of the military saints were not expressed in literary and artistic sources alone. Evidence of their veneration can also be detected in the use of their names to found cities, dedicate churches and baptise children. The patterns which can be observed in such practices provide clues about the manner in which the saints were venerated and how their veneration differed in Byzantium and Rus. Onomastic evidence is sometimes necessary, moreover, fully to understand other types of sources. For example, the iconography of seals depicting the military saints was very similar in Byzantium and Rus, implying a close affinity between their imperial and princely cults. Yet investigation of the Rus seals shows that only princes who were named after the military saints featured them on their seals, while Byzantine courtiers used their images whether they shared a name or not. Such differences are not insignificant, and help to explain some of the changes which the saints’ cults experienced in Rus.

The sources described above are undeniably rich and provide a wealth of information about the cults of the military saints and their reception in Rus, although the precise ages and provenances of many of them are difficult or impossible to pin down. Previous studies have made progress in this direction on individual or small groups of sources, but much remains