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978-0-521-42567-4 - The Cambridge History of Russian Literature, Revised Edition
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1

THE LITERATURE OF OLD RUSSIA, 988–1730

The story of Russian literature begins with a date of great significance for Russian political and cultural history: the year 988, when the ruler of Kievan Rus officially accepted Christianity as the new faith of the principality. At that point there was no written literature in Rus, but by his action Prince Vladimir laid the foundations of what we now call medieval Russian literature, even though it would not come into real being – so far as we know from what has reached us after the destruction wrought by the Mongol invasion – for some years thereafter. But the eastern Slavs received an alphabet designed by SS. Constantine-Cyril and Methodius, and also fell heir to the rich Byzantine cultural heritage which had been and would be translated from the Greek.

When we speak of "literature" in the old Russian period, however, we must understand it as something quite different from our notions of "literature" in the twentieth century.

In the first place, most old Russian literature was not what we would consider fictional, or at least it presented itself as dealing with fact and reality. In the earliest period one of the leading literary genres was the chronicle (exemplified by the *Primary Chronicle*) which built upon the achievements of the Byzantine historians. This genre by its very nature claimed to be factual even though it contained some clearly fictional (or at least non-factual) elements. Another leading genre was hagiography, which dealt with biographical accounts of the lives of Russia's holy men and women: if a saint's life contained fantastic elements, they were meant to be taken seriously, and not regarded as fiction. Even works such as the epic *Igor Tale* purported to deal with historical matters, though the author obviously took literary liberties with his materials. To be sure, there were semi-fictional or fictional works in old Russian literature from very early on (the *Supplication of Daniel the Exile*, for example), and their importance increased as the old Russian period approached its end. But this does not alter the fact that "literature" in old Russia dealt primarily with the real world as medieval men saw it, and not with fictionalized accounts of it.

In the second place, old Russian literature was highly ideological.

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From the beginning it was closely linked to the church, and indeed in its first few centuries hardly existed outside it. Among the leading literary genres of Kievan Rus were prayers and sermons, specifically ecclesiastical in nature, as well as hagiography; and the oldest dated manuscript in our possession is the *Ostromir Gospel* of the mid eleventh century, a work designed as a lectionary. Since the church nurtured literature so carefully during the old Russian period, it was difficult for more secular works to be copied and to survive. This also meant that originality was suspect. Indeed, originality was even dangerous, for it could easily lead to heresy: the writer's chief task was to quote skilfully from those who had gone before him, or to express old and well-tested truths in a novel way. He was ill-advised to offer his readers anything startlingly original.

Since the church and the state were closely intertwined in medieval Russia, and since most literature was linked to the church, literature naturally supported the purposes of the state. Far from regarding themselves as antagonists of the state or the ruler, writers for the most part were at one with the objectives of their society and state. There were exceptions to this, of course, as with Prince Kurbsky and his polemic with Ivan the Terrible: but even here the fact that Ivan himself was a leading writer of the sixteenth century points to the closest possible connection between the state and literature. Indeed, in the broad sweep of the history of Russian literature it is only during the nineteenth century and down to the October revolution of 1917 that writers viewed themselves as fundamentally opposed to the state, or as social critics. Both before and after that interlude they have by and large supported the objectives of their society and the state in which they lived.

To this it may be added that in the medieval period there was little in the way of literary culture. Many works of the earliest period are anonymous – among them the greatest work of that time, the *Igor Tale* – or merely attributed to certain individuals, with greater or lesser certainty, on the basis of internal or external evidence. Most writers evidently worked in near isolation, deriving intellectual sustenance from the writings that had gone before them but not from any "literary community" in the modern sense of the word. Indeed there was scarcely anything resembling a professional writer in the medieval period: there were people who wrote, and sometimes very well, but they were really something else: priests or monks or government officials or even tsars. Toward the end of the seventeenth century this situation began to change, so that we may speak of two or three or four identifiable writers who lived at the same time and place and knew one another. Thus Feofan Prokopovich, one of the best writers of the early eighteenth century though he was in fact a high ecclesiastical functionary, could regard the government official and diplomat Antiokh Kantemir as a literary disciple of his. At this time not only did there begin

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to appear something resembling a community of literary men, there also emerged literary works in the modern sense (Kantemir's verse satires, for example), and at times which are important for literary history as distinct from political history. The year 1730 is more important in Russian literary history than it is in Russian political history, for it is a key year for the transition from the rich traditions of an ecclesiastically oriented medieval literature to a secular modern literature. Indeed, as a date in literary history proper it may be the most important one in the entire thousand-year sweep of Russian literature.

OLD RUSSIAN LITERATURE takes its origins from the work of the two Thessalonian brothers Constantine-Cyril (826–69) and Methodius (815–85), the Greek apostles to the Slavs. During their mission to Great Moravia, where they arrived as envoys of the East Roman Emperor in 863, they created a liturgical language enabling them to preach the Christian gospel in the vernacular of the Slavs. This language, today known as Old Church Slavonic, was based on the dialect spoken by the Slav population of the brothers' native Thessaloniki, but it was strongly influenced by Greek models in vocabulary, phraseology, syntax, and style. At the end of the first millennium, linguistic differences among the Slavs were still negligible, and Old Church Slavonic became the common literary idiom of all the Orthodox Slavs. After the death of Methodius, the Moravian church came under Frankish hegemony, and his disciples were exiled. The Cyrillo-Methodian tradition was preserved by Boris of Bulgaria and his son Simeon, whose reign (893–927) is still remembered as the golden age of Bulgarian literature. Ohrid and Preslav emerged as the new centers of Old Church Slavonic where the work of the two preceptors of the Slavs was preserved and a wide range of early patristic and Byzantine writings were translated or adapted from the Greek. From Bulgaria the corpus of Old Church Slavonic literature spread to Kievan Rus, and when Prince Vladimir in 988 finally decided to accept Byzantine Christianity, the Eastern Slavs soon developed a literature of their own on the foundation of the Cyrillo-Methodian and Bulgarian heritage.

The corpus of Greek texts translated into Old Church Slavonic by the brothers and their disciples was not arbitrarily chosen, but a hierarchically ordered group of writings, the most important

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being the books required for liturgical purposes. These included the *Leitourgikon* (*Sluzhebnik*) and the *Horologion* (*Chasoslov*), containing the prayers and hymns for the fixed yearly cycle; the *Triod katanyktion* (*Triod postnaya*), the *Pentekostarion* (*Triod tsvetnaya*), and the *Oktoechos* (*Oktoikh*), with prayers and hymns for the moveable cycle; the Lectionaries, drawn from the Gospels, from the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles, and from the Old Testament; the Psalter (*Psaltyr*); and the *Synaxarion* (*Prolog*), a collection of short exegetical sermons and saints' Lives. The oldest dated manuscript to have come down to us from old Russian literature, the *Ostromir Gospel* (*Ostromirovo evangelie*), belongs to this set of liturgical texts. It is a Gospel Lectionary copied from a Bulgarian translation for the Novgorod alderman Ostromir in 1056–7.

Second in the hierarchy of translated literature came the extended Lives of the saints and the writings of the Church Fathers, in particular the works of John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzen, the classics of Greek patristic literature. Their writings were either translated separately, or gathered in miscellanies with excerpts from various authors. From early Kievan literature two such miscellanies (*Izborniki*) have been preserved, copied in 1073 and 1076 for Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev, the former from manuscripts that had belonged to Tsar Simeon of Bulgaria. It also contains a treatise on figures of speech by the Greek rhetorician George Choeroboscus, and a list of twenty-five "secret" books on the Church's index, with a commentary that clearly shows that Church Slavonic literature could attract the reader for many reasons, even in Kievan times:

> If you want great stories, you may read the Books of Kings. If you crave exciting and edifying reading, you have the Prophets, the Book of Job, or Jesus Sirach. But if, finally, your demand is for song books, you may read the Psalter.

Next to the canon of liturgical, hagiographical, and patristic texts, the Russians received from their western and southern neighbors works belonging to such popular, "lowbrow" genres of Byzantine literature as the apocrypha, stories about the lives of the desert fathers, and chronicles. Among the Old Church Slavonic translations imported from Bulgaria by the beginning of the twelfth century were the Chronicle of John Malalas, a Syrian

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rhetorician of the sixth century, and the Chronicle of George the Monk, called the Sinner (Hamartolos), written in the middle of the ninth century. Both go from the creation of Adam down to their authors' own time. They relate the history of the Jewish people, the Oriental empires, Rome, and the Hellenistic world, culminating in an account of the Byzantine Empire and its role in the history of man's salvation. These chronicles contained a wealth of curious information culled from a variety of sources. Malalas is particularly interesting in this respect: his rambling narrative is interlarded with stories about pagan gods and ancient Greek heroes, sensational miracles and cruel disasters, so that it becomes a kind of Byzantine *Trivialliteratur*, in contrast to the Chronicle of Hamartolos, in which the monastic ideology is more evident. Byzantine chronicles had a decisive influence on the form and ideological content of old Russian historical writing.

The body of translated literature accumulated in Kievan Rus during the first century after Vladimir's conversion corresponds fairly accurately to the selection of books found in monastic libraries throughout the Orthodox world. In this selection there was no place for the classics of ancient Greek literature, still read and studied by educated "humanists" in Byzantium, or for "high-brow" historians like Procopius, Psellus, and Anna Comnena. Even such pseudo-historical works as the *Tale of Troy* (*Skazanie o Troe*) and the *Romance of Alexander* (*Khronograficheskaya Aleksandriya*) which might be seen as belonging, however marginally, to the classical tradition, were received in Rus in the context of the chronicles, and interpreted in terms of their Christian world view. Similarly, the sophisticated casuistry of Flavius Josephus' *History of the Jewish War*, translated by the beginning of the twelfth century, found no response with old Russian readers, whose interest focused on its account of events of biblical history, and on the striking imagery of its battle scenes, which provided original old Russian literature with a whole arsenal of military terms and martial metaphors.

The literary corpus received by the Eastern Slavs in Old Church Slavonic translations included the medieval *artes dictandi*, both in their metrical and in their non-metrical forms. Metrical discourse was first transposed into Old Church Slavonic by Constantine-Cyril, whose verse compositions in the new literary idiom closely

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follow the patterns of Greek verse. His "Prologue to the Gospels" goes back to the Byzantine dodecasyllable, whereas the meter of his "Eulogy to Gregory Nazianzen" may have been based on Byzantine hexameters. The writing of verbal poetry seems, however, to have been confined to the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition in Moravia and Bulgaria, while in Russia the musical variant was taken up and developed into a national school of Church Slavonic hymnody. This musical poetry has been sadly neglected by historians of old Russian literature, and we are still waiting for the manuscripts to be properly edited and examined.

Apart from the hymns of the liturgy, the forms of discourse found in old Russian literature are all versions of the non-metrical *ars dicendi*, ranging from the highly elaborate rhetoric inherited from the Greek *logos epideiktikos*, regulated by rhythm as well as by rhyme, to the simple, unadorned style, oscillating between artistic prose and ordinary speech.

From Vladimir's conversion until the Tatar invasions in the first half of the thirteenth century, Kiev was the cultural and political center of Rus, the capital, and seat of the metropolitan of the new Russian church. Here, Prince Yaroslav Vladimirovich (ruled 1019–54) strove to emulate the splendor of Byzantine art in its manifold manifestations: architecture, icon painting, music, and literature. This imitation of Byzantine models was not mechanical but active. The artists and writers of old Russia showed their creative skills by taking the models apart into single motifs and elements, selecting certain ones, and recombining them into new configurations.

The literary masterpiece of this early Kievan court art is the *Sermon on the Law and Grace* (*Slovo o zakone i blagodati*), a work attributed to Metropolitan Hilarion, the first Russian to hold this office, appointed by Prince Yaroslav in 1051.

The sermon is written in the form of *logos epideiktikos* and addressed, as the author explicitly declares in the proem (preamble), "Not to the ignorant, but to those who have feasted most abundantly on the sweetness of books." In accordance with encomiastic rhetoric, its prose is regulated by *isocola* (couplings of period-members of equal length) and by *homoioteleuta* (like endings.) The compositional theme of the sermon is the triumph of the grace of Christ over the Law of Moses. In the first part, this

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theme is developed in a series of allegorical antitheses, in which events and characters from the Old Testament are seen as foreshadowings and images of the truth revealed in the Gospels, beginning with the contrast between Hagar and Sarah, borrowed from Saint Paul (Gal. 4:21ff.). The central part of the sermon represents the triumph of divine Grace in a sequence of Christological antitheses, seventeen in all (five referring to the birth of Christ, five to His public life, and seven to His Passion). The third and last part, with its final eulogy to Prince Vladimir, celebrates the entry of Rus into Christendom. What was prefigured in the first, allegorical part of the sermon has been fulfilled in the third through the Incarnation of Christ, the event around which the whole sermon is centered. Allegory and fulfillment here correspond to each other as *figura veritatis* and *veritas* in the conception of history that underlies the rhetorical technique of the sermon. In this conception, taken from the Church Fathers and from Byzantine theology, the Old Testament was seen as a series of prefigurations of Christ and the salvation of future nations, led into the promised land of the Heavenly Kingdom, not by the Law of Moses, but by the Grace of the Lord. History understood in this way does not seek to discover the causal links between events and characters, but rather to interpret them as images of a timeless, archetypal pattern designed by God before the foundation of the world. This conception of history also underlies the representation of Vladimir as the imitator of Constantine the Great. What the latter achieved among Greeks and Romans in subjecting his empire to God, the former has achieved among the people of Rus, and their heavenly glory is the same.

Whereas the encomiastic rhetoric of the *Sermon on the Law and Grace* is a mode of expression typical of the *logos epideiktikos*, its figural interpretation is not confined to the genre of the encomium. Figural interpretation is more than a rhetorical technique. It is a way of thinking characteristic of early Kievan literature as a whole.

The ornate discourse of the encomium was not unanimously accepted in old Russia. There were those who, like the anonymous author of the twelfth-century *Sermon to a Brother Stylite* (*Slovo k bratu stolpniku*), refused to write "in artfully interwoven words or in a covert style," preferring the unadorned mode of expression

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found in the homilies of Abbot Theodosius of the Kiev Caves Monastery and those of Archbishop Luka Zhidyata of Novgorod, written in the same period as the *Sermon on the Law and Grace*. The only extant work of Clement Smolyatich, the second Russian to become Metropolitan in Kiev (1147–55), the *Epistle Written to Thomas the Presbyter* (*Poslanie napisano Klimentom metropolitom ruskym Fome prozviteru*), is a defense of allegorical exegesis.

The finest examples of the rhetorical sermon in twelfth-century Russian literature are the works of Cyril, Bishop of Turov (died about 1182). Cyril wrote epistles, parables, prayers, hymns, and sermons. A number of his sermons were included in the old Russian anthologies of Greek homiletics, the *Chrysostom* (*Zlatoust*) and the *Panegyrikon* (*Torzhestvennik*), a sure sign of their popularity. Most widely admired were his eight Easter sermons. Their compilatory character and lack of originality have been heavily criticized by modern scholars, but Cyril's use of the texts of others does not preclude originality. Cyril would select a verse from the Bible, a passage from John Chrysostom, another from Cyril of Alexandria, a third from Simeon Metaphrastes, and bring them together in a collage of quotations, allusions, and paraphrases. Among Cyril's favorite rhetorical devices are isocolic antitheses and parallelisms, comparisons, and prosopopeia, i.e. fictitious recreations of the speeches and gestures of his personages, as when, for example, in the *Sermon on the Deposition*, the Mother of God bursts into a long lament while gazing upon her crucified Son. Like the *Sermon on the Law and Grace*, Cyril's sermons are Christocentric and inspired by an awareness of Christ's presence. But his allegories are less dogmatic and more intuitive, his rhetoric often verges on poetry.

The *Sermon on the Law and Grace* and Cyril's Easter homilies follow a common compositional scheme inherited from Greek epideictic oratory. According to this scheme, a *logos* may be divided into three main parts: a proem, a "narrative" or exposition of the subject matter, and an epilogue in the form of a eulogy ending in a prayer. In the epideictic oration, the narrative is shortened and concentrated on the elements that enable the author to extol the acts and personal traits of his heroes above their real dimensions by means of rhetorical amplification. But in other variants of the *logos epideiktikos* the narrative is also amplified in the

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linear dimension, with the result that the eulogy is transformed into an entire account of the life and deeds of the central hero.

Both types of amplification are found in hagiography, the most popular of all the literary forms that prospered in Kievan Rus. The models were derived from works translated from the Greek, and by saints' Lives and legends written by the disciples of Constantine and Methodius, whose *vitae* are among the earliest examples of original Church Slavonic hagiography.

The first notable hagiographer in old Russian literature is Nestor, a monk from the Caves Monastery, the monastic center of Kievan Rus. Nestor wrote the *Reading on the Life and Slaying of the Blessed Martyrs Boris and Gleb* (*Chtenie o zhitii i o pogublenii blazhennuyu strastoterptsu Borisa i Gleba*), and the *Life of Our Holy Father Theodosius, Abbot of the Caves Monastery* (*Zhitie prepodobnogo ottsa nashego Feodosiya, igumena pecherskogo*), the former belonging to the abridged type, the latter to the type with expanded narrative. Both works were probably written between 1079 and 1085. In the *Life of Saint Theodosius* Nestor refers to himself as the author of the *Reading*, which he had already completed before embarking upon the larger *vita*.

Nestor's *Reading* is one of three different, but textually interrelated, versions of the same story: the killing of Vladimir's youngest sons by their brother Svyatopolk in the power struggle that ensued upon Vladimir's death in 1015. The throne was first seized by Svyatopolk, but he was later ousted by another brother, Prince Yaroslav Vladimirovich of Novgorod, and died in exile in 1019. The other versions of these events are the chronicle account and the anonymous *Narrative and Passion and Eulogy of the Blessed Martyrs Boris and Gleb* (*Skazanie i strast i pokhvala svyatuyu mucheniku Borisa i Gleba*). The basic story is identical in the various versions, but they differ in the rhetorical treatment of the material. Common to them all is a combination of two distinct modes of expression, one simple and artless, the other containing all the devices of panegyrical oratory. The former mode is used in relating the historical facts, the latter to amplify and interpret the historical narrative. The contrast between the two modes is most pronounced in the chronicle account and in the *Narrative*, whereas Nestor's style is more balanced. In the *Narrative* in particular, the martyrs' fictitious soliloquies are composed in the form of highly

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emotionalized laments, with strings of anaphoric *isocola*, scriptural quotations, and figural juxtapositions. Nestor views the misdeed within the context of universal history, in much the same way as the conversion in the *Sermon on the Law and Grace* is seen. Vladimir is the new Constantine, Boris and Gleb are compared to Joseph and Benjamin, Svyatopolk to Cain.

In spite of such divergences, the religious interpretation of the assassinations is fundamentally similar in all three versions. The brothers' acceptance of a violent death without resistance is represented as an *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ), by which they become partakers in the divine nature of Christ, exercising their powers of intercession in the Kingdom of Heaven as the celestial patrons of their brother Yaroslav and the Christian people of Rus.

This celestial aspect of their sainthood is symbolized in the mystical light that surrounds their earthly remains and their posthumous miracles. The light symbolism, less evident in the *Reading* and in the chronicle account, is a predominant feature of Nestor's miracle stories, in which their exhumed bodies "shone white like snow, and their faces were radiant like those of angels."

The use of light symbolism in order to bring out the *anagogical* dimension of the saints as images of the divine figure of Christ is characteristic of Nestor's hagiographical art, where this anagogical aspect is complementary to the representation of the saints' imitation of Christ's humbled, earthly figure.

This complementarity of the human and the divine in the saint's *imitatio Christi* also determines the structure of Nestor's *Life of Saint Theodosius*. Nestor never knew Theodosius personally: he entered the Caves Monastery only after the saint's death in 1074. The events forming the story line of his *vita* represent a selection from what others had told him about the life of his hero. A characteristic feature of the *Life of Saint Theodosius* is the strong emphasis on the abasement and sufferings of the saint in his childhood. We are repeatedly told that his mother, who objects to his becoming a monk, torments him, beats him to the ground, puts him in chains, and throws him into a dark dungeon. Although the account of the conduct of the saint's mother may seem strikingly realistic, this effect is only of secondary importance in the *vita*, where the primary function of the saint's humiliations is

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