CHAPTER I

THE EARLY RECORDS

The fascination of Russian studies relating to the early period of the national life lies largely in the fact that the records are in a state of transition between legend and history. They are quite different in character from the early historical writings of Scandinavian lands, where annalistic history, with its exact chronology, is unknown. On the other hand they differ essentially from our own Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in which the element of saga is reduced to a minimum, and of which the annals appear to be virtually independent of panegyrical or heroic poetry. The earliest Russian records have made use of practically every form of historical source—saga and heroic poetry, biography, annals, the reports of eyewitnesses, legal documents, such as international treaties, even the written records of books. All these sources of information have been utilised by the compiler; and surely no chronicler ever showed himself more liberal and more imaginative in the best sense of the word in the collection of his materials, or more skilled and constructive in his use of them to build up a vivid and readable, and, in general, dignified and convincing picture of a nation’s history.

The earliest Russian historical records are embodied in a written chronicle, composed, like most medieval historical works, in monastic circles. It was almost certainly written in a monastery in Kiev, whether as a single or a composite work. Its form is roughly annalistic. This annalistic form is derived ultimately from the Eusebian tables; but the more immediate form of the chronicle was doubtless directly suggested by other similar chronicles composed during the Dark and the Middle Ages on contemporary Greek and Latin models. The individuality of the Russian chronicle lies in the freedom with which the compiler intersperses his laconic entries with extended and vivid narratives, often amounting to complete short stories on historical
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subjects, and at times showing clearly that they are derived from ambitious oral narratives of a highly elaborate and artistic nature. Such entries are made under the years to which they are relevant, so that the annalistic form is still retained, though utilised as the merest skeleton, and enriched with every kind of matter which the compiler could find bearing upon his subject, not excluding lengthy quotations from the scriptures and hagiographical writings.

The history of Russia for the earliest period, therefore, resolves itself inevitably into a study of sources. And, moreover, so far as written sources are concerned, it confines itself largely to a history of the valley of the Dnepr, and more especially of the city state of Kiev—of Kiev, and, in a lesser degree, of Novgorod. This natural preoccupation of the chronicler with his own area has given rise to a widespread assumption that the history of Russia begins in, and was for long confined to, the western part of the country. It is now known, however, that the history of civilisation in Russia began long before the earliest period for which we have records, and that the eastern waterways were developed at least as early, if not earlier than the valley of the Dnepr. For further knowledge of the early history of eastern Russia we await the results of archaeological and Oriental researches. For the west we are fortunate in the possession of comparatively early Russian written sources of information.

The history of Kiev in early times, as we see it in the pages of the earliest chronicle, falls naturally into some five periods. This is not an artificial classification, though it does not necessarily correspond to actual changes or phases in the history of the period. It lies in the nature of the records.

1. First of all we have a period known to us chiefly through antiquarian speculation based apparently on faint traditions of the ancient mercantile importance of pre-Norse Kiev.

2. Next comes the traditional account of the establishment of Scandinavian power, beginning with Rurik, and developing into a long and detailed saga of Oleg, the first ruler of Kiev of whom we have circumstantial knowledge, and of his fosterage of
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Rurik’s son Igor, and of the reigns of Igor, his wife Olga, and his son Svyatoslav.

3. The life of Vladimir, who is generally regarded as the true founder of the Russian state and of the Russian Church. How far this view is in accordance with the evidence, we shall see better as we proceed. The account of his reign is derived partly from saga, partly from a written life of the saint, which may have already incorporated the saga material before it came into the hands of the chronicler. It is very possible that other early writings of Greek or Khazar provenance were also available for this period.

4. For the reigns of Yaroslav and Svyatopolk, Vladimir’s immediate successors, it is evident that the chronicler had at his disposal a wealth of evidence in the form of saga, and panegyric, perhaps also of elegiac poetry. This was probably partly in the Russian, but almost certainly also largely in the Norse language.

5. For the period of the time of Vladimir II, Monomakh, in whose reign the chronicle as we have it was probably compiled, the writer has made use of the reports of eyewitnesses, and of hearsay; of local events and local political opinion and movements in and near Kiev itself; of family history in the form of family saga. He has threaded his way through a maze of conflicting reports, and biased views, and clashing interests in one of the most difficult periods of the nation’s history. Inevitably the bias of the historian makes itself especially felt in his own day, and a critical scrutiny of the pages of the chronicle becomes particularly necessary in judging, not so much what actually happened, as why the events took place.

It will be apparent at a glance that the materials of which the earliest Russian chronicle is composed are of very uneven historical value. Before we can hope to begin the study of the actual history of Russia in the early period we must first make a critical survey of our sources. To do this an intensive study of the text is required. It is not enough to make a critical examination of the probable historical value of each annal, or group of annals. It ought to be possible, by bringing the information of
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different annals together, to reconstruct, in some measure, the
life of the times at which they hint. It is necessary to study the
bearing of one annal upon another and the significance of the
juxtaposition of certain annals, and of certain events, even when
these are recounted with a semblance of independence; to trace the
operation of cause and effect where the annalist may have failed
to do so. Moreover, it is not enough to study Kiev in isolation.
While following the course of events here, it is necessary to have
in view what is happening in the north, and to watch the bearing
and the repercussions of the quarrels and alliances, the invasions
and expeditions of other states, on that of Kiev; to realise the
correlation of events in the Russian microcosm.

Finally it is important to supplement our direct knowledge of
Russian history from the contemporary records of the surrounding
peoples. Illumination must and will come from Greek
educated historians of the period, as well as from Arabic and
other Oriental sources; perhaps from fragmentary documents of
the Khazars; from medieval Latin writers who were in touch
with the western parts of the Slavonic area. Above all it will
come from the vast wealth of Norse literature, which is still
virtually an unexploited gold mine for Russian history and
literature. A few isolated studies have already appeared, showing
that the relevance of Norse studies in this field is coming to be
realised; but as yet very little has been achieved by scholars fully
qualified to work at the Norse background of the Viking Age in
Russia, and in general little has been done beyond the sporadic
indication of chance similarities in the two literatures. A fuller
study of the interrelation of the two cultures by scholars equally
well qualified to handle both the Norse and the Russian material,
and with a knowledge of contemporary Oriental and Greek
records, is urgently needed. In the following pages it has not
been possible for me to do more than to indicate some of the
lines which it seems to me such an investigation ought to take,
and the channels of information which may profitably be pursued.
I have only ventured to do so in the hope that someone better
qualified than myself will carry the study further along such lines.
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The earliest native Russian document which gives direct information relating to Kiev is the Povest Vremennykh Lét, ‘The Chronicle of Contemporary Years’.¹ The earliest form of the text is preserved in two important versions, known as the Laurentian and the Hypatian.² This work has been traditionally ascribed to one Nestor, a monk in the Pechersk monastery at Kiev (c. 1056–1114); but a comparison of the contents of the chronicle with works indubitably by Nestor has demonstrated the fact that he cannot have been the author of the former.³ Many scholars hold that the chronicle has incorporated earlier annals, and that the final compilation was the work of Sylvester, Abbot of St Michael’s monastery of Kiev.⁴ All that can be said with certainty is that the work was probably composed, or at least assumed its present form, about the year 1113.⁵

In the year A.D. 1116, we read the following entry in the Laurentian text: ‘In the hope of God’s grace, I, Sylvester, abbot of St Michael’s, wrote these books of the Annals, hoping to receive mercy from God, in the time of Prince Volodymer, prince of Kiev, and of my own abbacy of St Michael’s in the year 6624 (1116). May whosoever reads this book remember me in his prayers.’

It is extremely probable, as Cross observes, that some method of recording historical events had been employed in Kiev from

¹ The only form of the text of the Povest which has been accessible to me is the Chronica Nestori (Textus Russico-Slovenicus), ed. by Fr. Miklosich (Vindobona, 1860). This text is in Old Slavonic, and for the convenience of English readers I have given my references where possible to the English translation by Samuel H. Cross, The Russian Primary Chronicle (Cambridge, Mass. 1910).
² The Laurentian text was named from the copyist who prepared it at Suzdal in 1377. The Hypatian dates from the middle of the fifteenth century, and was probably copied at Pskov from a south Russian original, but named from the monastery of Kostroma in which it was discovered. See Cross, op. cit. p. 78.
³ See Cross, op. cit. pp. 80ff.
⁵ Cross, op. cit. p. 97.
the period of the introduction of Christianity and of Greek culture under Vladimir I, and that these records would be utilised in the compilation of the Povést. But in general it would seem natural to take Sylvester’s statement as a simple expression of fact, and to conclude that the Povést was compiled in its present form in the second decade of the twelfth century.

At the same time I cannot refrain from suggesting in this connection that sources of information other than Greek writings and Scandinavian oral tradition may have been accessible to the compiler or his predecessors. We shall see as we proceed that there is serious ground for believing that Jewish writings relating to the Khazars contain information relating to the rulers of Kiev in the early tenth century. Information such as this may have been accessible in Kiev, either directly from Khazar sources, or through some intermediary, such as the Greek churches on the shores of the Black Sea (cf. p. 45 below). The utilisation of Khazar sources of information by the Russians would be a simple matter after the capture of Sarkel (Bela Vežha) by Svyatoslav in 965. We have some evidence that the Khazars had books and libraries which they housed in the rock-cut churches, and that they were in the habit of referring to these as authorities on matters of the past (cf. p. 46 below). I am the more inclined to suggest that the possibility of Khazar records as one of the sources of the Povést has been underestimated, in view of the fact that the mission of the various religions, notably Islamic, Greek and Jewish, to Vladimir I in an attempt to convert him, as we find this in the pages of the Povést, finds an exact, even a verbal, parallel in a Khazar document to be referred to later.

The Povést covers, roughly speaking, the period from the middle of the ninth to the second decade of the twelfth century, and it is to this period, and more especially to the earlier portion, that the heroic traditions are ascribed by the annalist.\(^1\) In the traditional oral poetical narratives, known as byliny, these heroic

\(^1\) For a brief discussion of the heroic conditions which prevailed in Kiev and other city states of western Russia during the Tatar invasions, see Chadwick, *Growth of Literature*, Vol. ii (Cambridge, 1936), p. 24.
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traditions are centred in Prince Vladimir of Kiev—whether Vladimir I (980–1015) or Vladimir II (1113–1125); but in the Pověst they are by no means confined to either of these two princes. The majority are assigned to the period which preceded the reign of Vladimir I; but they seem to have flourished at Kiev down to a much later date, as we see from many entries in the Pověst itself, notably the story of the encounter between the Kasog chief Rededy a and Mstislav of Tmutorakan, s.a. 6530 (A.D. 1022); cf. p. 66 below. In actual fact the annals of the reign of Vladimir I are comparatively bare of heroic incidents. The annalist is concerned rather to show the importance of the events which led to the adoption of Christianity in 988, and to Vladimir’s marriage with a Greek princess, and the consequent adoption of foreign culture at the court of Kiev.

The annals for the reign of Vladimir I and for the period which preceded are based partly on ecclesiastical (Greek) sources, partly on diplomatic and other documents, and partly on oral traditions. The account, for example, of almost the whole of the so-called Scandinavian period is undoubtedly based on oral traditions. Oral tradition is also responsible for the account of the conversion of the people of Kiev under Vladimir I; and of the part played by his uncle Dobrynya—whether these have come down wholly through the medium of such tradition, or through the intermediary form of a life of the saint. On the other hand, there can be no reasonable doubt that from about A.D. 1050 to 1113 the information is derived from the accounts of eyewitnes ses. In general, therefore, the information within this latter period, which includes the reign of Vladimir Monomakh, grandson of Yaroslav the Wise, and great-grandson of Vladimir I, may be regarded as reliable in essentials in regard to actual matters of fact, such as the

1 Cross, op. cit. p. 99.  
3 Ib. p. 105.  
4 An early life of Olga is believed to have existed in written form, and this has no doubt yielded some material to the chronicler. Cf. p. 31 below.  
5 Cross, op. cit. p. 108.  
6 For the Norse and Russian evidence relating to the marriages of Yaroslav and his sons, see Cross, ‘Yaroslav the Wise in Norse Tradition’ Speculum, Vol. iv (1929), pp. 181 ff.
statement that Dobrynya was voevoda (‘military commander’) of Kiev under Mstislav Vladimirovich, and that he took part as such in the northern campaign of 1096.

The literary perspective of the chronicle, therefore, may be said to focus naturally on the events in Kiev which lead up to the reign of Monomakh; and the domestic and political relations of the princes and their wars which precede this are calculated to show both the importance of family unity in the face of the common enemy—the nomad menace; and the predominant element of Slavonic blood in the royal house of Kiev. In the preceding period the nationalistic aim of the chronicler is equally prominent. In particular we may point to the accounts of the careers of Svyatopolk and Yaroslav the Wise. The former, who depended for his support on the Pechenegs and Poles, is brought to ruin and a tragic end. Yaroslav himself, in so far as he depended on his Varangians, was repeatedly defeated and forced to flee. He is even represented as proposing to abandon his people and take refuge in Scandinavia; but the native population prevent him, and force him to fight the enemy. It is the native elements, the people themselves, the inhabitants of Kiev and Novgorod, and of the surrounding country, who rally around Yaroslav, and force him to fight the foreign invaders till a successful issue is reached. The course of these events will become clearer as we proceed.

The high light which is focused on the earliest period, and which culminates in the reign of Vladimir I, is carefully calculated to minimise the permanence of the Scandinavian element in the early history of the royal house and of the city state of Kiev. The whole Scandinavian rule is treated as a preface to the reign of Vladimir I, who is appropriately represented as a saint and founder of the Russian Church, and as the founder of the Russian (i.e. emphatically the Slavonic) kingdom of Kiev. It is with the intention of exalting these all-important features of Vladimir’s life that the chronicler takes pains to assure us that his mother was Slavonic, and that he even Slavicises his name, which is in reality a Gothic (Valdimir) or a Scandinavian name
(Valdimarr). And it is obviously with this same end in view that he recounts at length the story of Vladimir’s idols and his heathen activities in Kiev itself in early life, and those of his uncle Dobrynya, the voevoda, in Novgorod. By thus exalting Vladimir I as the first Slavonic ruler, the first founder of the Russian state, and the father of the Russian Church, the author of the Povést has utilised the oral traditions of the Scandinavian period and the ecclesiastical records of the reign of Vladimir I to forward his aim of indicating how the entire course of Russian history has led up to a desired consummation in the rule of Monomakh, who is thus represented as partly Slavonic in descent, and exclusively nationalistic in outlook.

As Vasiliev points out,¹ Oleg, Igor and Svyatoslav were all in a position to make treaties with the Greeks; but under Vladimir matters changed, and a careful reading of his relations, and of those of his successors, with the Greeks suggests very strongly that Kiev had now declined to the position of some kind of vassal state to Byzantium. As a matter of fact, a careful reading of the Povést itself makes it clear that the traditional founder of the state of Kiev as we know it, that is to say, of historical Kiev, was not Vladimir I, but Oleg. It is very possible that something of a nationalistic revival may have taken place as early as the reign of Vladimir I, carefully engineered by such voevody as Dobrynya and Blud, and that much was made of this in later times, both by the Church, and by the nationalistic elements so prominent under Yaroslav and under his grandson Svyatopolk, and finally under Vladimir II. But the traditions carefully recorded in the Povést of Oleg’s capture and occupation of Kiev—not from a primitive Slav population, but from a settled Norse community; of his subsequent foreign campaigns and victories; his successful raid on Tsargrad (Byzantium)—for whatever this is worth; and his treaty with the Greeks—again for what it is worth; all these make it clear that, in the opinion of the chronicler at least, Oleg was a ruler to whom tradition ascribed a paramount

¹ For the evidence, see his interesting article, ‘Was Old Russia a Vassal State of Byzantium?’ Speculum, Vol. vii (1932), pp. 350 ff.
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place in the early history of Kiev. The chronicler himself has sought to minimise this importance. He tells us, for example, nothing of his origin or parentage, though he mentions that he was of Rurik’s kin, and thus came to hold such a distinguished position among the Scandinavians themselves as is implied by his part as ‘fosterer’ to Rurik’s son Igor.¹ In all probability Oleg was himself of the highest rank, and father to Olga, Igor’s wife; but the chronicler is silent on the subject.

Yet there can be no doubt that the chronicler was himself aware of traditions which represented Oleg as of paramount importance in the early history of Kiev. Nothing shows this more clearly than his insertion of the text of a treaty which he claims to have been made between Oleg and the Greeks as the result of a successful raid by Oleg and his Varangian družina against Byzantium. It is stated in the Pověst that in this expedition in 907 Oleg and his ships appeared under the walls of the Greek capital, and after pillaging the suburbs, and killing many of the people, forced the Greek emperor, Leo VI, ‘The Wise’, to form a treaty with him. Neither Byzantine nor western sources mention such an expedition, or even Oleg’s name; but Vasilev points out² that the Greek history of Leo the Deacon,³ which is an important authority for this period, puts into the mouth of John Tzimises a threat to Svyatoslav which seems to have reference to this treaty: ‘I hope you have not forgotten the defeat of your father Igor (Ἰουγορ), who, having scorned the sworn agreements (τὰς ἑνόρκους στόνδος) came by sea to the imperial city with a great army and numerous vessels.’ These ‘sworn agreements’ made with the Byzantine empire before Igor’s time may, in Vasilev’s

¹ In the words of the Pověst: ‘When Rurik had died (sic) he entrusted his realm to Oleg, because he was of his kindred, and he gave to him his young son Igor to rear, for he was very young’ (Umershyu Ryurikovi predast knyazhenye svoye Olgovi, ot roda yemu sushchu, vdav yemu syn svoy na rutsë, Igorya, bè bo dëtesk velmi), Pověst, s.a. 6378–6387 (a.d. 870–879).