

SVERRIR JAKOBSSON, *The Varangians*. In *God's Holy Fire* (New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2020. XVIII + 212 pp. + 10 illustrations. – ISBN 978-3-03-053796-8

MICHAL TÉRA, *Kyjevská Rus. Dějiny, Kultura, Společnost / Kievan Rus. History, Culture, Society* (Russia altera 34). Pardubice: Pavel Mervart 2019. 721 pp + illustrations + maps. – ISBN 978-80- 7465-413-8

GEORGIOS TH. KARDARAS (ed.), *To Βυζάντιο και η Ρωσία του Κιέβου / Byzantium and Kievan Rus' (882–1240) (To Βυζάντιο σήμερα 8)*. Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation 2020. 270 pp. – ISBN 978-9-60-790560-4

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That cultural ties would form between the Greco-Roman world and peoples far north of the Black Sea was not inevitable. The ancient Greeks' colonies along the sea's shores affected their Scythian trading-partners without, however, altering beliefs or political cultures. They receive attention in MICHAL TÉRA's *Kyjevská Rus*. Commercial and – occasionally – diplomatic exchanges carried on through Antiquity. Radical change came only with the arrival of seafarers linking the Nordic world with the Greco-Roman south. The significance of the change is brought out by TÉRA. Considering the waterways between the Baltic, Caspian and Black Seas plied by the Northerners known as Rus and the latter's eventual installation on the Middle Dnieper, he assesses the initial allure of Islamic silver followed by that of Constantinople's markets which prompted regular flotillas southwards from the early tenth century on. The significance of the linkup between Nordic seafarers, Islamic silver, and then the Byzantine world, features in SVERRIR JAKOBSON's *The Varangians*, too.

Without impugning these books' scholarly merit, two observations are in order, the first concerning discoveries broadcast since they went to press. Combined lead isotope and trace-element analysis of artefacts from Gotland and Öland suggests that their silver comes from melted-down dirhams of the first half of the ninth century (or earlier), a significant proportion deriving from early Abbasid mints.¹ If these preliminary findings are con-

1. JANE KERSHAW ET AL., *The Scale of Dirham Imports to the Baltic in the Ninth*

firmed, the silver influx will have begun in the first half of the ninth century – rather than subsequently.² And that, from the very beginning of the Viking Age, Northerners voyaged quite near the Crimea and handled Byzantine-style artefacts emerges from Gnezdovo's late-eighth-century strata, containing fragments of Byzantine-type glass-vessels, besides a dry dock for repairing clinker-built boats.³ Thus their *indirect* contacts with the Black Sea zone began long before Northerners' began trading directly with Constantinople. A second observation is more general: communications between the Black Sea, the steppes and beyond were neither uncostly nor safe. This is so obvious as to be overlooked, yet it accounts for the vagaries in relations between the Byzantine world and Rus and Northerners. Carrying on regardless was the pulse of communications which, from c. 988 onwards, the ecclesiastical organisation based in Constantinople generated. Full-blown Christianization was, however, largely confined to Rus princely elites and urban networks: hence the uneven, rather wayward, nature of Christianity's spread.

Taken together, the works under review cover most interactions between northern societies and the Byzantine world. That distance was no bar to contacts is shown by SVERRIR JAKOBSSON. Alexios III Angelos could seek troops from Scandinavian rulers, according to a contemporary saga: Hreiðarr, the Norwegian-born envoy sent to King Sverrir of Norway, was 'knowledgeable about many things', the king conversing with him often. As JAKOBSSON indicates (p. 111), Hreiðarr's knowledge reflected his stay in Byzantium, attesting how individuals and ideas circulated between the imperial court and northernmost elites shortly before the Fourth Crusade. This episode is just one among many nuggets of information JAKOBSSON provides. His main concern, though, is with cultural history. The world of 'the Greeks' – the emperor in his 'Great City' (*Mikligarðr*) – is a scenario that is both counterpoint to the Northerners' own ways and ideal order, where justice prevails. The sagas should, JAKOBSSON argues,⁴ be viewed

Century: New Evidence from Archaeometric Analyses of Early Viking-Age Silver. *Fornvännen* 116 (2021) pp. 185–204. See the ERC project 'Silver and the Origins of the Viking Age': <https://sites.google.com/view/viking-silver/home>.

2. As supposed by our authors and, until recently, me: SIMON FRANKLIN – JONATHAN SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200*. London 1996, pp. 16–27.

3. V. V. MURASHEVA ET AL., *Vremia voznikoveniia poseleniia gnezdovskogo arkheologicheskogo kompleksa po dannym radiouglerodnogo datirovaniia*. *Rossiikaia Arkheologiia* no. 4 (2020) pp. 70–86.

4. JAKOBSSON's line avowedly bears resemblance to (although developed independently of) ROLAND SCHEEL's, *Byzanz und Skandinavien, Bedingungen und Konsequenzen*.

as marking stages in the development of Icelandic self-awareness through cultural memory, rather than quarries for hard facts. Not coincidentally, the sagas' imaginative heyday came in the thirteenth century, when journeying between Iceland and Byzantium petered out. Icelandic 'family sagas' elaborated upon the feats of heroic ancestors serving the emperor loyally and well, precursors of the Crusaders. Only then did the term 'Varangians' gain frequent usage, encapsulating distinctively Nordic virtues, as against the blander twelfth-century accounts of visits to Byzantium, which tend to transmit the Latin usage and outlook of clerical writers. Clearly, as JAKOBSSON signals, their image of the emperor as pious, just and exerting worldwide reach resonated with thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga-composers and -listeners; in contrast, the motif of 'perfidious Greeks' beloved of Western narratives is lacking. JAKOBSSON allows for some factual content in the sagas, especially the older verses they sometimes incorporate. Particularly noteworthy is the theme of Christian converts returning from *Mikligarðr* and spreading the Word among Northerners. The theme of Varangian piety occurs in Old Rus sources, too, notably the *Primary Chronicle*'s tale of the 'Varangian martyrs' and various references in the Kyiv Cave-Monastery's *Paterik*.⁵

The Varangians' service in Byzantium also receives attention in GEORGE THEOTOKIS' admirable contribution to the collection of studies, *To Vyzantio kai e Rhosia tou Kiebou*. But Rus literary sources reflect the perspectives of their mainly clerical writers. Archaeological data might rectify the imbalance. However, ALEXANDER MUSIN warns in his chapter, the most spectacular and numerous items from the Byzantine world 'are objects of private devotion' (p. 86). Russian soil conditions have preserved such items as monks' leather girdles, unknown from the Byzantine lands, while finds of pectoral crosses register Christianization. But objects wholly lacking religious connotations are rarer, and largely the preserve of the sociopolitical elite. Eleventh-century princes' taste for Byzantine authority-symbols and political culture emerges from, respectively, PAVLA DRAPELOVA's discussion of their coins and NIKOS MELVANI's of the Hippodrome scenes

zen mittelalterlicher Kulturbeziehungen. Göttingen 2015.

5. See the Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian Text, tr. SAMUEL H. CROSS and OLGERD P. SHERBOWITZ-WETZOR. Cambridge, MA 1953, pp. 95–6; The Paterik of the Kievan Cave-Monastery, tr. MURIEL HEPPELL. Cambridge, MA 1989, pp. 1–5, 9, 181, 188–9; See also JOHN H. LIND, Christianity on the Move: the Role of the Varangians in Rus and Scandinavia. In: FEDIR ANDROSHCHUK ET AL. (eds), Byzantium and the Viking World. Uppsala 2016, pp. 421–35.

painted in Kyiv's St Sophia and the church's other imagery. And IOANNA TZIPHA's study of the so-called 'Instruction' that Vladimir Monomakh addressed to his sons demonstrates his familiarity with Eastern Christian culture, if not with any specific 'Mirror for Princes'. Monomakh's 'Instruction', she notes, lays more emphasis on soldierly virtues than its Byzantine equivalents do. Of prime concern to Rus churchmen was the availability – in Old Slavonic translations already made by the South Slavs – of the texts essential for worship and exposition of the faith. These, TATIANA BORISOVA shows, were nearly all to do with the liturgy:⁶ little else was translated after the early burst of activity by scholars like Metropolitan Ilarion. Drawing on her expertise in hymnography, she demonstrates the difficulties confronting Rus bookmen like Kirill of Turov who, writing hymns himself, sought to convey what he had learnt from the translated texts: not only faulty manuscript readings but also limitations in Old Church Slavonic's vocabulary hindered understanding. Simpler obstacles to correct belief are highlighted by EIRENE KASAPÉ's study of 'sorcerers' and shamans: they long posed a challenge to the politico-clerical elite, even in towns like Novgorod and Rostov. Other stark realities are brought out in GEORGIOS KARDARAS' introductory survey: the land of Rus was often under pressure from the steppe peoples; and princes' capacity to protect church life and further the faith was impaired by internecine strife long before, in the 1230s and 1240s, they fell victim to well-organised nomads – the Mongols.

Without detracting from the scholarly worth of *To Vyzantio kai e Rhosia*, one must acknowledge that the sheer unevenness of Byzantium's impact on Rus emerges most tellingly from MICHAL TÉRA's *Kyjevská Rus*. TÉRA underlines the heterogeneity of the populations beneath the princes' sway and their interaction with such steppe peoples as the Khazars and the Polovtsy, encapsulated in the rulers' early adoption of a Khazar title, khagan. Not that this title's inherently monarchical implications took deeper root than Byzantine political thought did: the notion of rule by a charismatic princely clan prevailed among the Rus. TÉRA brings out the gulf between the ideals of Christian rulership professed in, for example, Monomakh's 'Instruction' as against the life at grassroots of largely self-regulating communities. At the same time, he devotes a chapter to written culture – book-learning, but also the birch-bark letters of Novgorod and other towns which imply

6. The key importance of liturgical texts to the Rus' understanding of the past has also been demonstrated by SEAN GRIFFIN, *The Liturgical Past in Byzantium and Early Rus* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought). Cambridge 2019.

everyday literacy in the urban networks. Modern scholarly debate about the waxen tablets unearthed in Novgorod in 2000 is evaluated judiciously, along with the finds of Scandinavian runic inscriptions from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Having laid out magisterially the ingredients of this derivative, arguably unintegrated, yet utterly distinctive culture, T ÉRA poses the question: ‘To whom, then, does Kyivan Rus belong?’ His answer is no less apt for being tantalizing: ‘To nobody and to all’ (p. 639).

Keywords

Kyivan Rus; Varangians