



THOUSANDTH ANNIVERSARY
**The Christianization
of Kievan Russia**

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In 988, a thousand years ago, the people of Kiev waded into the Dnieper River, in obedience to a decision taken by their prince, Vladimir, and underwent mass baptism. This "was an event of great historical significance", writes Metropolitan Juvenaly, a high dignitary of the Russian Orthodox Church, in his contribution to this issue, "bringing as it did a major part of the population of eastern Europe into the family of Christian nations".

Vladimir's decision had an immediate bearing on the fortunes of his Kiev-based principality known as Rus', a grouping of east Slav tribes from which the Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian Slav peoples of the USSR would later emerge. In the short term, Rus' was enabled to assert its position vis-à-vis the Byzantine Empire and the other Christian States of Europe. But Vladimir's decision also had a more lasting influence on the later history and identity of the peoples who inherited its legacy. In the words of Pope John Paul II, head of the Roman Catholic Church, in an Apostolic Letter published on the occasion of the millennium of the baptism of Kievan Rus', "The elements of the Christian heritage have imbued the life and culture of those nations.... making room for a totally original form of European culture, indeed of human culture itself."

This issue of the *Unesco Courier* is a contribution to a number of activities which Unesco is organizing to mark this anniversary, including a symposium on "the significance of the introduction of Christianity in Rus' for the development of European and world culture and civilization", which will be held at the Organization's Paris Headquarters from 28 to 30 June 1988.

We also pay tribute in this issue to three poets who all shared, in addition to talent, a hunger for freedom: an Englishman, Lord Byron, who was born 200 years ago; a Frenchman, René Char, who died this year; and a Peruvian, César Vallejo, who died fifty years ago. Also commemorated in the following pages is an important act of liberation—the abolition of slavery in Brazil 100 years ago. The granting of liberty by decree, by a stroke of the pen, was followed by a hard struggle to enjoy its fruits on the part of a black Brazilian community which is only today starting to discover its own identity and forms of expression.

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Masterwork
of
medieval Russian art



The Old Testament Trinity (above and front cover) was painted by the great Russian icon painter Andrei Rublev (c.1370-c.1430) some time in the first quarter of the 15th century for the Trinity and St. Sergius monastery at Zagorsk, near Moscow. The icon depicts the visit of three angels to Abraham and Sarah as recorded in the Bible. Rublev treats this traditional subject in an original manner, retaining only the three angels, who are depicted with gentle grace in a circular composition where all is harmony and spirituality. The three figures are also those of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which asserts that God is one in substance but three in "person" (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and is fundamental to Orthodox theology. In the 16th century, on the orders of Tsar Boris Godunov, the Trinity was given an encasement (oklad) of vermeil and precious stones (see front cover), which was removed at the beginning of the 20th century when the icon was restored. Since 1929 this masterpiece of Russian art has been exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow without the encasement, in all its original splendour (above).

The baptism of Kiev

BY BORIS V. RAUSCHENBACH

*A thousand years ago,
the birth of a Christian nation*

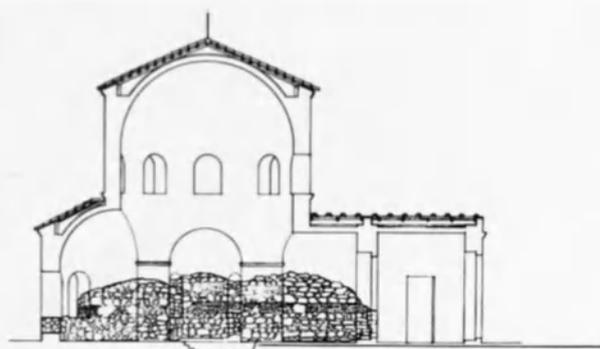


Photo O. Makarov © APN, Moscow

A thousand years ago, in 988, the Slav principality of Kievan Rus', or Kievan Russia, came into being as one of a cluster of Christian States in Europe. Its emergence was one of the far-reaching consequences of a bold feudal reform of the State structures which was carried out by Grand Prince Vladimir, who wished to put his principality on the same footing as the developed feudal monarchies of that time.

In 980 Vladimir was at the head of a loose federation of Slav tribes, which could only be held together by the use of armed force (or at least the constant threat of its use). In order to strengthen this federation, the young prince took two important decisions. First, he settled in Kiev, intent on keeping his hands on the reins of government, which his predecessors had abandoned for months or even years while leading military expeditions. Second, he endeavoured to unite the Slav tribes ideologically—as we should say today—by means of a religion common to them all.

Once established in Kiev, Vladimir began to build fortifications to the east of the town, thus making it clear that he meant to stay in the capital and defend it against nomads. It was essential to the success of the radical State reforms that life in the city should be peaceful and safe.



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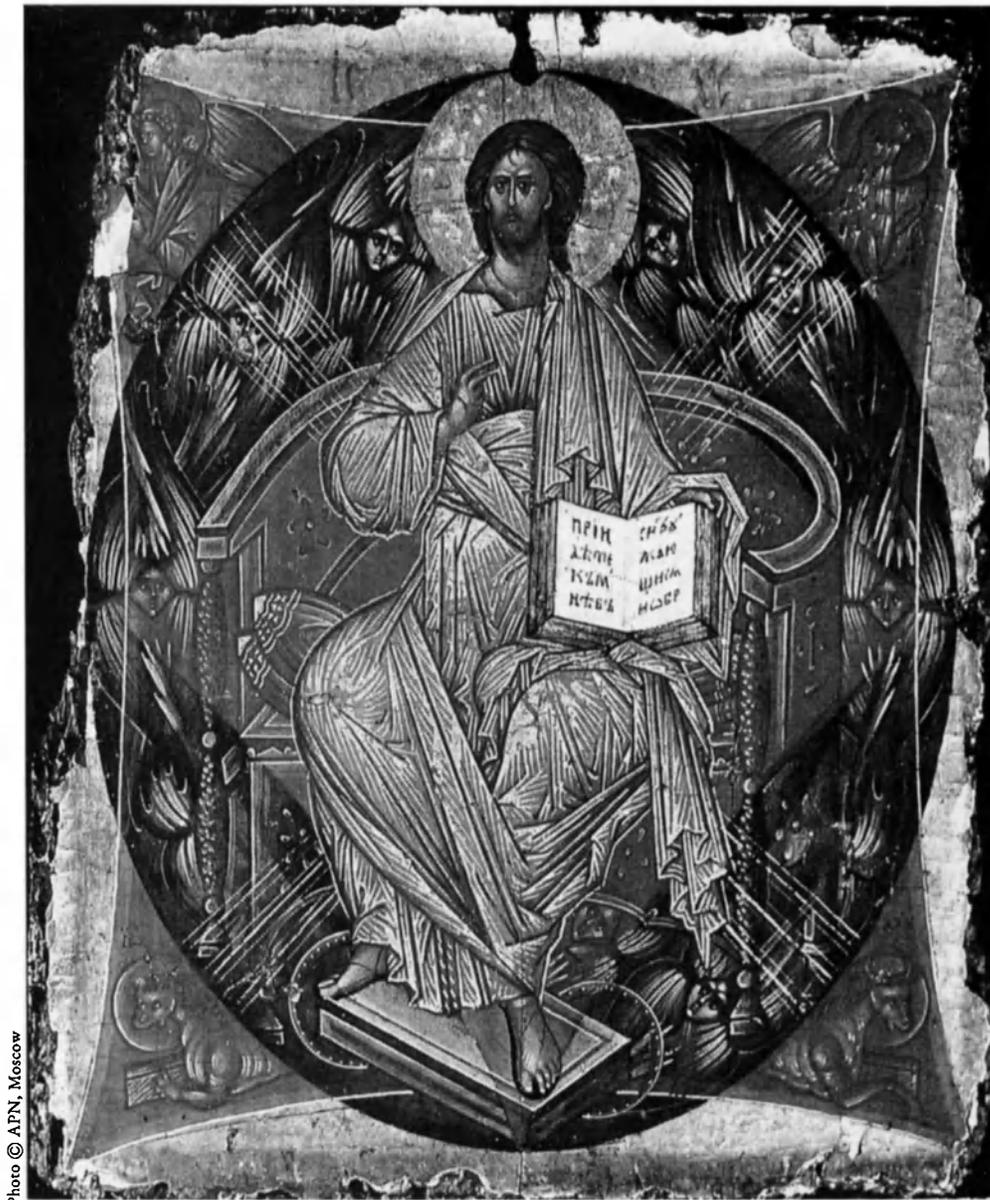


Photo © APN, Moscow

The Saviour in Glory, an icon painted by Andrei Rublev around 1420 and today preserved in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Christ is depicted on His throne surrounded by seraphim and the 4 symbols of the Evangelists (see also colour page 21).

A thousand years ago, in 988, Vladimir, grand prince of Kiev, who had recently been converted to Christianity, bade the peoples over which he ruled to follow his example, in order to consolidate their political and spiritual union. Far left, imposing bronze statue in Kiev (4.5 metres high and standing on a pedestal 16 metres high) shows Vladimir holding a cross in one hand and his princely headgear in the other. The monument was inaugurated in 1853. Vladimir later became the hero of popular epics and was canonized by the Orthodox Church. According to the Soviet specialist Sergei Beliaev, Vladimir was baptized in the baptistery of the Uvarov basilica at the Byzantine town of Chersonesus in the Crimea (near the modern city of Sevastopol). Left, drawing of a reconstitution of the baptistery. Above left, vertical section of the baptistery as it was in the 10th century, showing the remains of the walls as they are today. Drawings were executed as part of a project to rebuild the baptistery.

To solve the second problem—the unification of the allied tribes—he first of all gave “equal rights” to all the main tribal gods (and consequently to those groups of the clergy that had most influence). A traveller arriving in Kiev from afar could see that the god of his own tribe was worshipped in Kiev as well as the Kievan gods. Six heathen gods were worshipped in Kiev; traces of these cults have been found by modern archaeologists.

These measures taken by Prince Vladimir strengthened the State. But it soon became clear that the path on which he had embarked so successfully was actually leading nowhere. There were two main reasons for this. First, even after Vladimir’s innovations the heathen religion perpetuated the old way of life. It suited a patriarchal system, but it was a major obstacle to the formation of the new production relationships of nascent feudalism. A new law, new customs, a new social awareness and a new approach to the world were all needed. The old paganism could not provide these things. But they were all to be found in Byzantium.

The second reason was that Kievan Rus’ could not attain equality with the leading countries of Europe and the East, it could not, to use a modern expression, reach “world class” unless it borrowed from those countries a knowledge of crafts, building techniques, science, culture and much else. And all this, too, was to be found in Byzantium.

Vladimir’s choice of religion was largely conditioned by

The "Chronicle of Radziwill" (named after the Lithuanian prince to whom it belonged) is a late 15th-century illustrated manuscript containing over 600 miniatures, many of which are based on far older models. Far right, miniature showing Princess Olga, the first pagan ruler (945-964) of Kievan Russia to accept the Christian faith. Right, miniature bearing the date 1071 depicts an encounter between Christians and pagans. At left are the prince with his halberd and a bishop with his cross, accompanied by their followers. At right, a wizard in a long white robe with wide sleeves, also accompanied by his attendants.



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history, but it was also due to his wisdom as a statesman. Rus' had already forged quite strong economic links with Byzantium, which was not far away. The Bulgarians, who were the kinsfolk of the people of Rus', had accepted Christianity about 100 years before, largely thanks to the work of Cyril and Methodius, who had developed a Slav alphabet and preached Christianity in the Slav language. Vladimir's decision may well have been influenced by the fact that in the Orthodox Church, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, people could worship God in a language they understood.

At this time Byzantium was still at the height of its glory. The tradition of Antiquity still survived there. Homer and other classical writers of Antiquity were studied in its schools, and Plato and Aristotle lived on in the philosophical disputes that took place there. The Byzantine form of Christianity met the needs of a feudal society, and therefore fully conformed with Vladimir's intentions. And at the same time it solved the problem of providing a single religion for all the tribes of ancient Rus'.

Neither Rus' nor Byzantium regarded the proposed acceptance of Christianity as a purely religious step. Byzantium's view, expressed in simplistic terms, was that since Rus' was turning to the Orthodox faith and the head of the Orthodox Church was the Byzantine patriarch and the emperor, Rus' automatically became a vassal of Byzantium.

But the State of ancient Rus' was expanding and was already quite powerful, and had fought Byzantium successfully several times; it did not intend to play the role of a vassal. Vladimir and his court had other ideas. They thought that the acceptance of Christianity and the adoption of Byzantine culture and skills along with Christianity should in no way diminish the independence of Rus'. As the prince saw it, Rus' should become a State friendly to Byzantium, but should retain its entire sovereignty.

The introduction of Christianity was a gradual process; authorities today believe that it took around 100 years—a very short time in view of the vast size of the country. The Christianization of Sweden and Norway, which began about the same time as that of Rus', took 250 and 150 years respectively.

Vladimir's political reform released a potential that had been gradually building up within the society of Rus'. The

rapid development of the country shows how timely the reform was.

Master builders were invited to come from Byzantium to Rus', where they erected stone churches and other buildings and adorned them with frescoes, mosaics and icons. Russians worked with them, learning skills of which they had known nothing before. The next generation erected elaborate buildings in the towns of Rus', with hardly any help from foreigners. Changes took place in agriculture, too, and horticulture was introduced into Rus' at this time.

The clergy who had come to Rus' from Byzantium did not merely conduct religious services in the new churches; they also trained "national leaders" for the Church, and knowledge and literacy spread widely as a result. Schools were opened, and Vladimir made the children of the nobility attend them, despite the mothers' protests. He sent young men to study in other countries. A chronicle was begun. Like other developed States, Kievan Rus' started to mint its own gold coins.

Little by little, ancient Rus' became a State with a new high culture, although it would be wrong to think that it did not have an authentic culture of its own in pagan times. This pagan culture was to live on for a considerable time, and it imparted certain unique features to the art of ancient Rus'. What was new was mainly that body of knowledge that had already been acquired by cultured peoples throughout the world, ranging from the works of Aristotle to techniques for building stone arches.

But rapid as the changes of Vladimir's day were, his feudal reform was not completed in his lifetime. More time was needed, and Vladimir's work was finished by his son, Yaroslav the Wise. As the chroniclers say, Vladimir ploughed the land, Yaroslav sowed the seed, and we (later generations) have reaped the harvest.

Yaroslav was as zealous as his father had been in continuing the reform. Like his father, he built fortifications to defend his lands, this time mainly in the west. Like his father, he saw to it that nothing held up the feudal reforms; and he showed just as much energy in building, clearly striving to make Kiev the equal of Byzantium (later Constantinople). He did much to develop trade; and he began to strike silver coins as well as gold.

Yaroslav's principal aim, however, was to build up a



Engraved on this white stone cross is the so-called "Hymn to the Cross", an important specimen of Russian writing in the 12th century. The cross once stood near the church of the Intercession of the Virgin, on the river Nerl (see photo 22, page 15), and is today preserved in the municipal museum at Bogolyubovo.



Photo M. Iurchenko © APN, Moscow

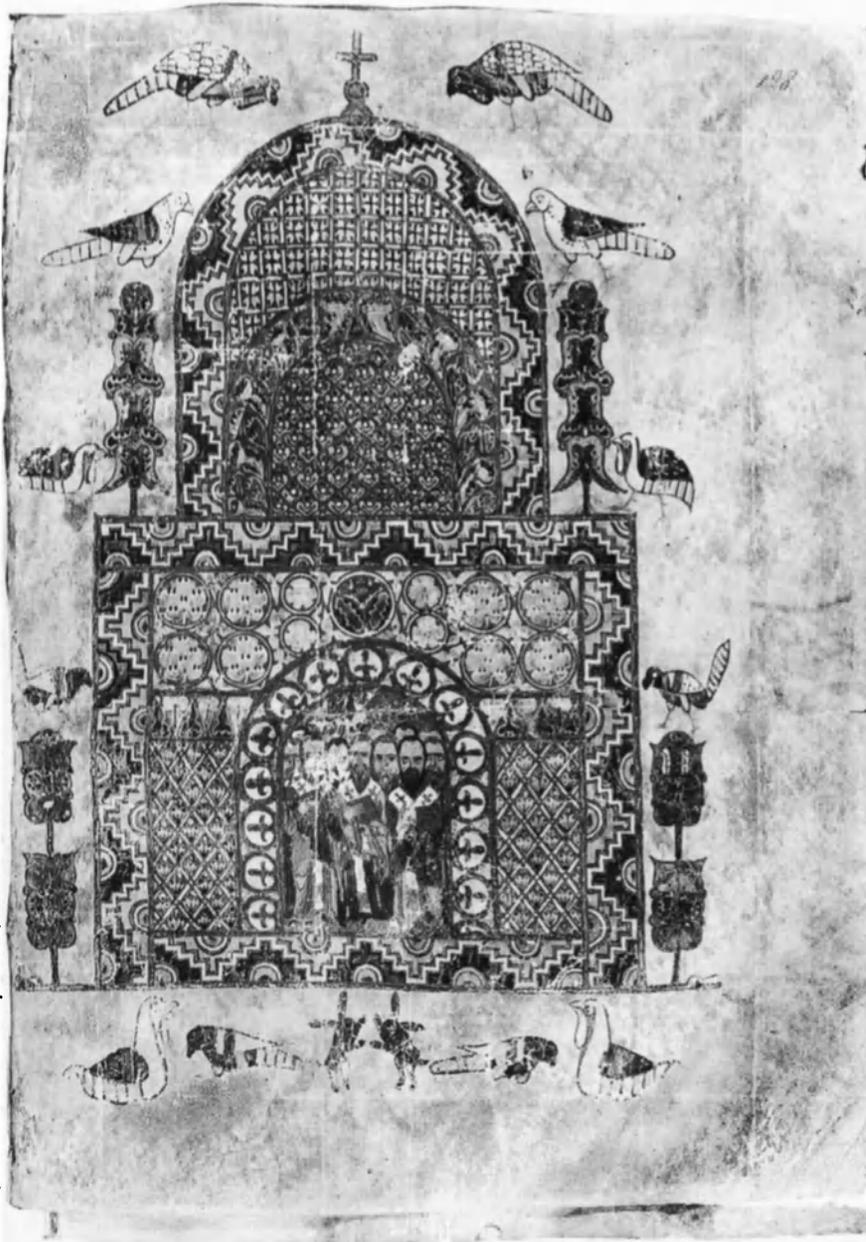
genuinely Russian intelligentsia (insofar as such a concept can be used with reference to that period). Vladimir had not had time to do this. Literacy in itself was not enough; steps had to be taken to ensure that Kievan Rus' did not have to "import" Greek clergy, that it had its own scholars, writers and philosophers, and that it could, if necessary, wage an ideological struggle, notably against Byzantine imperial ideology. It is not surprising that Russian monasticism is first heard of in Yaroslav's day.

Inventories dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (earlier ones have not survived) show that most of the books in the monastic libraries were secular rather than religious. There were chronicles, historical records, "itineraries" or geographical works, philosophical and military treatises, and classical works such as the *History of the Jewish War* by Flavius Josephus. A learned monk must indeed have had an all-round education.

Chronicles such as *The Russian Primary Chronicle* and polemical works (often with a definite political undercurrent) were written in the monasteries. Books were copied, too. We are indebted to copyists in the monasteries for the fact that we can read the ancient chronicles that have come down to us (works such as *The Song of Igor's Campaign*). Icons were painted by masters such as Alimpi of Kiev. The Russian clergy who replaced those from Byzantium were trained in the monasteries.

In 1051, after the death of the Greek metropolitan of Kiev, Yaroslav himself (acting without the emperor or the patriarch of Constantinople) "having called together the bishops", for the first time appointed a Russian metropolitan, Hilarion, a priest in the prince's village of Berestovo. The Russian Orthodox Church was asserting its independence. Metropolitan Hilarion was certainly a man of great ability. His work "On Law and Grace", a remarkable example of the literature of ancient Rus', was a trenchant ideological weapon in the battle for the independence of Kievan Rus'.

The work of literacy teaching and school building continued under Yaroslav (and not only in Kiev). We have evidence that a school for 300 children was opened in Novgorod in 1030, at which children began to "learn to read books". Schools for girls were founded. Gradually all sectors of the population learnt to read and write, as we know from



inscriptions that have been found on strips of birch bark. Yaroslav himself “was diligent in reading books by night and day”, and he also “collected many books, translated books from the Greek to the Slav language, and wrote many books”. Culture was spreading rapidly among the people of ancient Rus’.

Civilized States cannot exist without written laws. Yaroslav introduced a number of written statutes, including “Russian Law”. In a word, under Yaroslav, who completed Vladimir’s reform, Kievan Rus’ became a freely developing feudal State, the equal of any State in the civilized world. It was surpassed by no other country, either in economic and social structure (feudalism, which continued to develop) or in culture, trade or the arts of war.

The introduction of Christianity, which became the ideological basis of the feudal State system of ancient Rus’, played a progressive role in the early Middle Ages. The old division into tribes was a thing of the past. A people had taken shape as a State, and from it, in time, emerged the Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians. ■

BORIS VIKTOROVICH RAUSCHENBACH is a Soviet Academician, winner of the Lenin Prize and a member of the International Academy of Astronautics. A specialist in mechanics, the theory of combustion and the control of the orientation of spacecraft, he was closely involved in the preparations for the first Soviet space flights. Among his published works are a study on spatial structures in ancient Russian painting (1975) and an essay on iconography as a means of conveying philosophical ideas (1985).

The earliest works of Old Russian literature date from the late 10th century. Most of them have come down to us in the form of collections of texts known as Izborniki. Above, frontispiece of the Izbornik of 1073, one of the oldest of these manuscripts. Based on Bulgarian texts translated from Greek, it was compiled for Prince Svyatoslav Yaroslavich and constitutes a kind of theological encyclopaedia containing over 380 articles by 25 authors.