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Religious Sites in Kiev During the Reign of Volodimer Sviatoslavich

PETRO P. TOLOCHKO

The date of the official introduction of Christianity as the state religion of Kievan Rus' is rightfully considered to be 988. Many scholars have interpreted this event, which is undoubtedly of great historical importance, as an almost simultaneous and general enlightenment of the Rus' people that came in the wake of Volodimer's own enlightenment. For the chroniclers, 988 divided the history of the Eastern Slavs into two periods: the heathen period, when the Rus' people were in total darkness and ignorance; and the Christian period, when the light of spirituality and culture appeared. The thesis of "darkness and light" does make sense, but it must not be taken as absolute nor, especially, simplified. Christianity began to penetrate into Rus', at first into Kiev, more than a hundred years before the reign of Volodimer. Paganism survived among the populace even two hundred years after the official baptism of Rus'.¹

The reign of Volodimer was the most complex in terms of the formation of an ideological system. The right solution was not found immediately. The first attempts to create such a system, as is so often the case, consisted of patching the old rather than introducing the new. Realizing that the unity of Rus' could not be based merely on the military might of the central government, Volodimer tried from the outset to make the idea of unity important for all the East Slavs. For this purpose he built on the hills of Kiev, outside the princely court, a new pagan temple with a pantheon of the six chief gods of Kievan Rus'—Perun, Khors, Dazhboh, Stryboh, Symarhl, and Mokosha.

Where was this temple and sacrificial altar located? Ever since V. V. Khvoika's discovery, it has been identified with the remains of a stone shrine in the center of the most ancient settlement. The structure consisted of various-sized slabs of sandstone mixed with clay and it had an ellipsoid shape (with dimensions of 4.2 by 3.5 meters). Four-cornered projections (0.7 to 0.8 meters) emerging from the four sides of the temple were oriented

¹ P. P. Tolochko, *Drevniaia Rus' : Ocherki sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* (Kiev, 1987).

to the four points of the compass.² The discovery excited great interest and attracted the attention of many scholars. The most thorough studies were by K. V. Bolsunovs'kyi immediately after the completion of Khvoika's excavations and by M. K. Karger after the monument was reexamined in 1937. Without questioning the religious nature of the building, scholars have interpreted its specific purpose variously. Bolsunovs'kyi connected the open altar with the cult of the Slavic god Svitovyd.³ Following A. A. Dintses, Karger believed that it was at the temple of Perun that Oleg, Igor' and Sviatoslav swore oaths.⁴

Karger thought that Bolsunovs'kyi's connection, which was based on a comparison of the four projections of the Kiev temple with the four faces of the well-known Zbruch idol, was naive. It does not strike me as such. But perhaps we should talk not about Svitovyd, who was a deity of the Western Slavs, but about his Eastern Slavic equivalent, Rod, as B. O. Rybakov demonstrated.⁵ In any case, there is every reason to believe that Igor' and Sviatoslav did not swear oaths at this altar. Of particular interest in this respect is a chronicle entry for 945 which discusses the arrival of a Byzantine mission in Kiev: "Заутра призва Игорь слы, и приде на холмъ, где стояше Перунъ, и покладоша оружье свое, и щиты и золото, и ходи Игорь потъ."⁶ A literal reading of the chronicle suggests that the mission first went to Prince Igor' 's residence and then, together with Igor' and his retinue, to the temple of Perun, which stood on a "hill." We learn where this "hill" was located from a chronicle entry for 980: "И постави [Volodimer] кумиры на холму внѣ двора теремнаго: Перуна древяна, а главу его сребряну, а усъ златъ, и Хърса, Дажьбога, и Стрибога, и Симарьгла, и Мокошь. . . и осквернися кровьюми земля Руска и холмъ тъ."⁷

The conclusion that the old Kiev temple ceased to function in the first half of the tenth century and was moved to a new place, outside the oldest fortifications, has been confirmed by archaeological excavations.

In 1975, in the course of excavations by the Kiev Archaeological Expedition, the foundations of a mysterious structure were discovered beneath the building at 3 Volodymyrs'ka Street. Trenches had been dug beneath it in the loess to a depth of 60 to 90 centimeters. The trenches were filled with large stones, broken pieces of thin, large bricks, pieces of slate,

² V. V. Khvoika, *Drevnie obitateli Srednego Podneprov'ia i ikh kul'tura* (Kiev, 1913), p. 66.

³ K. V. Bolsunovskii (Bolsunovs'kyi), *Zhertvennik Germesa—Svetovida* (Kiev, 1909), pp. 5–12.

⁴ M. K. Karger, *Drevnii Kiev*, vol. 1. (Kiev, 1959), p. 112.

⁵ B. A. Rybakov, *Iazychestvo drevnykh slavian* (Moscow, 1981), pp. 458–61.

⁶ *Povesi' vremennykh let*, vol. 1 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1950), p. 39.

⁷ *PVL*, pt. 1, p. 56.

fractions of lime-water with admixtures of ground brick, and other materials dating to the tenth century. The plan was an elongated rectangle 1.75 meters wide and extending 7 meters from north to south. Projecting out from the rectangle's northern, southern, and eastern sides were six rounded symmetrical projections shaped like flower petals. The two large projections were close to 2 meters in diameter; the four smaller ones were 1 meter in diameter.⁸

The unusual configuration of the foundations of the structure, precisely oriented with the points of the compass, as well as the presence of early material, leads us to conclude that these are the remains of a religious structure from the pre-Christian era. They could well be the remains of the temple that is mentioned in the chronicle entries for 945–980. The six petal-shaped projections could have served as pedestals for idols of the six Slavic gods, namely, Perun, Khors, Dazhboh, Stryboh, Symarhl, and Mokosha. This is supported by the discovery on the southern side of a large ashpit located in a cup-like depression close to 3 meters in diameter. It contained layers of coals and ash, burnt clay, and a large quantity of animal bones, mostly of bulls. A study of the stratigraphy of the ashpit confirms that it was formed by the burning of a ritual fire. This finding fits in well with the *Hustyn' Chronicle*, which reports that an eternal fire was maintained beside the temple of Perun. In nature this ashpit resembles the sacrificial post discovered by Khvoika in 1908 beside the temple at the center of the oldest part of the city. That temple was surrounded by small round pits filled with ashes, coals, and shards of tenth-century ceramic pottery. Similar ashpits were discovered in the nineteenth century when Volodimers'ka Street was being laid out, and during S. S. Hamchenko's excavations in 1926.

Observations of the way in which the foundation trench was filled indicate that the structure was deliberately destroyed. We know from the *Primary Chronicle* that this could have happened in 988. Although the chronicle, which so dramatically describes the overthrow of the idols, contains no reference to the fate of the pagan temple, we can assume that Volodimer destroyed it just as he destroyed the idols. Iakov Mnikh's "Pokhvala kniaziu Volodymyru" reports that he dug up and smashed pagan temples and broke up their idols.

It is difficult to say anything certain about the exteriors of the two pagan temples on Starokyivs'ka Hill. The saga of Ólafr Tryggvason contains words that describe the pagan temple of the tenth century as a shrine in which idols were kept. "Ólafr," the saga says, "never respected the idols and always tried to act accordingly. Nevertheless he frequently accom-

⁸ P. P. Tolochko, *Drevnii Kiev* (Kiev, 1983), pp. 40–42.

panied the *konungr* to the temple, and yet never went inside but stood outside the door,” presumably while Volodimer made sacrifices to his gods. The testimony of the saga has not been confirmed by archaeological evidence.

A second pagan temple stood in the Podil, or lower town. This was the temple of Veles, “the cattle god,” patron of merchants and traders. The “*Zhitie Volodymyra*” states that the Kiev prince “*Волоса идола, его же называли скотьим богом, повелел в Почайну реку сбросить.*” The precise location of the shrine to Veles is unknown, but since Veles was replaced in the Christian era by St. Vlasii, also a patron of cattle, we can assume that the Church of St. Vlasii was erected on the site of the pagan temple. That church was located on Nyzhnii Val Street, on the border between the Podil and the Obolon’ districts, where the cattle of Kiev were pastured. In the tenth century the present-day Voloshs’ka Street in the Podil went past the temple of Veles to the Obolon’ pasture. In the late Middle Ages the street was also called “*Skotoprohonna.*”

Volodimer’s attempt to revive paganism did not bring the results that he hoped for. The pantheon of six gods on the Starokyivs’ka Hill did not make Kiev into the ideological center of pagan Rus’, nor did it eliminate local autonomist tendencies. Today, a thousand years later, it is evident that Volodimer and his followers made a serious political blunder. As a state religion, paganism was outdated. For most of the countries neighboring Rus’, it was a stage left behind.

In Rus’ Christianity had been establishing itself for more than a century. In some periods—the reigns of Askold, Ol’ga, and especially Iaropolk—it attained noticeable results. E. E. Golubinskii, the prominent church historian, believed that during the reign of Igor’, Christians prevailed over pagans numerically, morally, and politically.⁹ Written sources, both foreign and native, indicate from the end of the ninth to the end of the tenth centuries, two ideological systems—the pagan and the Christian—coexisted in Kiev. While eternal sacrificial fires for pagan gods burned in Kiev, Christian shrines were being built.

The Primary Chronicle speaks in detail only about the Church of St. Elias, which was the city cathedral. It was here that the Christians in Igor’ ’s retinue swore oaths to uphold the Rus’-Byzantium treaty of 944. We can assume that the church survived the pagan revival in the reign of Volodimer. It stood not far from the port on the Pochaina River, no doubt on the site of the present Church of St. Elias in the Podil. The naming of

⁹ E. E. Golubinskii, *Istoriia russkoi tserkvi*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1880), p. 68.

shrines after shrines previously located in the same place was a tradition of the Rus' church.

Citing Joakim's Chronicle, V. Tatishchev spoke about the founding of the Cathedral of St. Sophia by Princess Ol'ga.¹⁰ This is supported by an entry in one of the fourteenth-century Apostles, according to which St. Sophia was sanctified in 952. The cathedral was destroyed during the reign of Sviatoslav. Joakim's Chronicle relates that after his defeat beside the Danube, Sviatoslav blamed the Christians and sent his men to Kiev with orders "храмы христиан разорить и сжечь, и сам вскоре пошел, желая всех христиан погубить." After Volodimer accepted Christianity as the official state religion, the Sophia cathedral was rebuilt and a monastery was founded beside it. This was confirmed by Thietmar of Merseburg in 1018: "The archbishop of this city [Kiev] with relics of saints and various ecclesiastical adornments arranged for Boleslav and Sviatopolk a meeting at the monastery of St. Sophia, which, unfortunately, accidentally burned down last year."¹¹ In place of the wooden Sophia, Iaroslav the Wise erected a new stone edifice, which has survived to our time.

The first religious building erected immediately after the baptism of Rus' was the Church of St. Basil. It was built on Perun's hill in honor of its patron, Prince Volodimer: "И се рекъ, повелъ рубити церкви и поставляти по мѣстомъ, иде же стояху кумири. И постави церковь святого Василья на холмѣ, иде же стояше кумиръ Перунъ и прочии."¹² The precise location of the Church of St. Basil has not been established. Archaeological studies of the foundations of the pagan temple have not revealed traces of a later wooden edifice. The stone Church of St. Basil that was built in 1183 in Iaroslav's Great Court was located about a hundred meters southeast of the temple. It is difficult to say on which of these two sites, located in the same district, Volodimer's Church of St. Basil stood.

The central Christian shrine in the reign of Volodimer Sviatoslavich was the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin, or the Tithes Church. According to the chronicle, it was founded in 989 and completed in 996: "Посемъ же Володимеръ живяше въ законѣ хрестьянстѣ, помысли создати церковь пресвятыя Богородица, и пославъ привиде мастера отъ Грекъ."¹³ When construction was completed, the church was decorated with icons, crosses, and utensils. To maintain his church Volodimer designated a tenth of his

¹⁰ V. N. Tatishchev, *Istoriia rossiiskaia*, vol. 1 (Moscow and Leningrad, 1962), p. 111; see also vol. 3 (1963), p. 241, note 241.

¹¹ *Sbornik materialov dlia istoricheskoi topografii Kieva*, pt. 2 (Kiev, 1874), pp. 1–2.

¹² *PVL*, vol. 1, p. 81.

¹³ *PVL*, vol. 1, p. 83.

income from his realm, hence its alternate name, the Tithes Church: “Даю церкви сей святѣй Богородици отъ имѣнья моего и отъ градъ моихъ десятую часть.”¹⁴

The Tithes Church was built on the site of a former graveyard, beside the oldest fortifications, which had lost importance by the end of the tenth century and had been levelled. The location of the church next to the prince’s court has led researchers to regard it as his shrine. Later, after St. Sophia had been constructed, this was obviously the case, but at first the Tithes Church was the city cathedral and the residence of the metropolitan.

A second site of Christianity in tenth-century Kiev was the region of Askold’s grave. Here, according to the Primary Chronicle, stood the Church of St. Nicholas, built by a certain Olma on the grave of Prince Askold. The Kiev *Synopsis* (1674) says that the church was built by Princess Ol’ga. Both chronicle accounts had their proponents and opponents, but it is generally thought that the second account is the more reliable. As a newly baptized Christian, Ol’ga would have found it natural to build a church on the grave of the first Christian prince. It is not impossible, however, that she rebuilt a church in the Uhors’ke Urochyshe, since a chapel could have stood here since the time of Askold. In the reign of Sviatoslav, as Joakim’s Chronicle reported, the church on Askold’s hill was destroyed. We have no reliable evidence to support the claim that Volodimer rebuilt the Church of St. Nicholas after he accepted Christianity, but at the same time there is nothing to contradict the claim. The extensive church construction that Volodimer undertook after 988 is attested to by the most ancient chronicles.

The location of religious sites in Kiev during the reign of Volodimer Sviatoslavich reflected the complex ideological situation in Kiev in the time before the official introduction of Christianity in Rus’ and in the first decades after its introduction. Both pagan and Christian religious shrines appeared and disappeared in Kiev and its environs, according to the success of one or the other religious system. The beliefs had varying success even in the reign of Volodimer Sviatoslavich. At first paganism had the upper hand, and this led to the destruction of Christian shrines. Later, Christianity got the upper hand, and it was the pagan shrines and temples that were destroyed.

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¹⁴ PVL, vol. 1, p. 85.