

Late Byzantine Views of Rus: A Reassessment

Abstract

The late Byzantine empire maintained close ties with the principalities of Rus, but these have been studied almost exclusively in the context of the crises surrounding the appointments of rival metropolitans for the East Slavonic lands in the mid- to late fourteenth century. Other types of sources show, however, that Rus was a subject of serious scholarly interest for several generations of late Byzantine intellectuals. The contemporary politics and geography of Rus, as well as its earlier conversion to Christianity under Byzantine auspices, are discussed in works of various genres and periods. Although the accuracy of these writings is limited, they reveal that the hostility which arose from the machinations in the church hierarchy was not the full story of Byzantine-Rus relations. Indeed, in the empire's weakened state post-1261, many members of the Byzantine elite viewed Rus as a powerful and reliable (if unsophisticated) supporter whose geopolitical success was thanks largely to Byzantium's civilising influence.

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Despite (or perhaps because of) its diminished standing on the international stage, the late Byzantine empire (1261 – 1453) was a place of lively interest in the outside world. One of the main reasons for this was necessity: with the empire surrounded by a considerable number of usually hostile neighbours, Byzantine officials relied on a combination of intelligence, diplomacy and intervention in order to make best use of their state's dwindling ability to influence foreign affairs.¹ But the motivation to learn about foreign lands was not limited to a pragmatic need for information, and authors with no pressing reasons to investigate particular countries still wrote about them in works of history or geography, for reasons ranging from curiosity to a taste for the exotic to nostalgia. Although the accuracy of such accounts is often mixed at best, they provide vital information about how the Byzantines understood their world. Historical and geographical texts, written for circulation among an educated elite, were at least as important as diplomatic documents in forming perceptions of other countries and the

¹ On late Byzantine diplomacy in general see N. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine Diplomacy, A.D. 1204 – 1453: means and ends*, in: J. Shepard – S. Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy*, (Papers from the Twenty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990), Aldershot 1992, 73–88; C. J. HILSDALE, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy in an Age of Decline*, Cambridge 2014.

empire's relationship with them. It is therefore vital to assess such works when seeking to understand Byzantine society's engagement with, and views of, the world around it.²

This approach has potential benefits for the study of late Byzantium and the East Slavs. Research on their relations has traditionally been heavily weighted in favour of the period before the Mongol invasions of the 1230s, which witnessed the first encounters between the two sides through raiding and trading, the conversion of the East Slavonic leadership to eastern rite Christianity, and the flowering of Byzantine-influenced culture. Studies of relations in later centuries are in the minority, and focus almost entirely on two conflicts in the upper echelons of the church, to the exclusion of other types of knowledge and interactions. In the mid- to late fourteenth century, the rulers of Lithuania attempted to secure the creation of a new metropolitan see for their majority-Orthodox territories, an initiative which the princes of Moscow bitterly opposed. Byzantium's vacillation over this issue led to a series of crises and recriminations.³ Another breakdown in relations occurred after the Council of Florence-Ferrara (1438 – 1439), when Grand Prince Vasilius II of Moscow rejected the resulting church union despite the efforts of Isidore, the Byzantine metropolitan of Kiev.⁴ Because these events are relatively well documented and of genuine historical significance, they are widely discussed in scholarship. But as important as it is to understand them, they do not constitute a complete picture of late Byzantine perceptions of the East Slavs, and a number of authors wrote about other aspects of their history and contemporary culture. The following study will investigate the diversity which characterised these writings in order to bring balance to this important aspect of late Byzantine thinking about foreign affairs.

Like the post-restoration successor empires of Byzantium, the East Slavs at this time did not constitute a single state. In the ninth to early thirteenth centuries, most of them inhabited an entity known as Rus, a collection of autonomous principalities ruled by members of a single dynasty, known as the Riurikids. Following the Mongol conquest of the 1230s, the rulers of Lithuania began expanding into the western territories of Rus, and by the early fifteenth century controlled most of its central, southern and western areas, including Kiev, the former capital. The regions of the north

² Insightful studies of late Byzantine views of Italy and Lithuania have already appeared: A. E. LAIOU, *Italy and the Italians in the Political Geography of the Byzantines (14th Century)*, *DOP* 49, 1995, 74–98; D. BARONAS, *Byzantium and Lithuania: North and South Look at Each Other*, in: M. Kaimakamova – M. Salamon – M. Różycka (eds.), *Byzantium, New Peoples, New Powers: The Byzantino-Slav Contact Zone, from the Ninth to the Fifteenth Century*, (*Byzantina et Slavica Cracoviensia*, 5), Cracow 2007, 303–317.

³ A classic study of this period is J. MEYENDORFF, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia: A Study of Byzantino-Russian Relations in the Fourteenth Century*, Cambridge 1981. See also F. TINNEFELD, *Byzantinisch-russische kirchenpolitik im 14. Jahrhundert*, *BZ* 67, 1974, 359–384.

⁴ For further details see M. CHERNIAVSKY, *The Reception of the Council of Florence in Moscow*, *Church History* 24, 1955, 347–359; YA. S. LUR'É, *Isidor, Mitropolit vseya Rusi*, in: *Slovar' knizhnikov i knizhnosti drevney Rusi*, D. S. Likhachev (ed.), Leningrad et al., 1987 – 2004, II/i, 449–450.

and north-east officially remained under Mongol control until after the fall of Constantinople, although the local princes began increasingly to defy and disregard the Mongols from the late fourteenth century onward. At this time, the city of Moscow was rising to prominence under the leadership of the local branch of the princely clan and the metropolitan took up permanent residence there in 1325, although his title remained metropolitan of Kiev. Other cities, including Tver, Rostov, Iaroslavl and Novgorod, were, however, still ruled by independent princes and threatened Moscow's dominance at various times.⁵

The East Slavonic regions ruled by Riurikid princes are referred to here as Rus, rather than Muscovy, which implies an anachronistic political primacy of Moscow. The East Slavonic regions under Lithuanian control are referred to as Lithuania. These terms are, of course, not the same as those used by Byzantine authors, whose knowledge of the political situation in eastern Europe and the relevant toponyms varies significantly, and whose descriptions of the area are often confused or incomplete. The reasons for their choices of particular terms are not always clear, and may have more to do with literary style than geographic precision. Questions of terminology are not central to the present investigation, but for the sake of clarity all translated quotations will give original Greek place-names in transliteration, followed if necessary by a modern equivalent in square brackets.

Certain difficulties of interpretation notwithstanding, a number of texts in various genres shed light on the longstanding and multi-faceted interest of late Byzantine writers in their co-religionists far to the north. Their discussions and descriptions of Rus show their appreciation, if not deep understanding, of a distant people who were at once friendly, rich, and highly exotic. Located at a safe distance from the borders of the empire, Rus, unlike most other states with which Byzantium had dealings, was never a military or economic threat. Indeed, it was frequently benevolent toward Byzantium, distributing financial aid and according the empire the respect it deserved. Furthermore, Byzantine authors' awareness of their own empire's past involvement with this weird and wonderful place was a source of pride in a world where its influence was declining. Their writings, although not particularly informative about Rus and its history, highlight a neglected side of late Byzantine thinking about foreign affairs. Aside from church controversies, late Byzantine writings about Rus tend to cluster around two general subject areas: its contemporary geography and relations with the empire; and its earlier conversion to Orthodoxy under Byzantine auspices. Both of these are discussed by the earliest, and also most prolific Palaiologan-era writer about Rus, the philosopher and historian Nikephoros Gregoras.⁶

⁵ For an overview of this history see J. MARTIN, *Medieval Russia 980 – 1584*, Cambridge 2007.

⁶ On Gregoras and his work in general see E. FRYDE, *The Early Palaeologan Renaissance (1261 – c. 1360)*, (The Medieval Mediterranean: Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400 – 1453, 27), Leiden 2000, 357–373.

Gregoras' excurses on Rus in his *Roman History*, which covers events from 1204 – 1358, have been of interest primarily as an aspect of his polemics against the supporters of hesychasm, as well as a minor source of information about the machinations surrounding the appointment of rival metropolitans in the East Slavonic lands. Largely unnoticed, however, has been the fact that Gregoras' interest in Rus extended well beyond his polemical agenda, and he devotes considerable space to describing the land, its people and history, even when these remarks are not relevant to ecclesiastical politics. Gregoras' generally admiring but largely inaccurate views are clear from his first mention of Rus in chapter seven of the *History*. Following an overview of the empress Irene's foreign policy and social standing, Gregoras launches into a discussion of the distribution of honours to subject and allied rulers at the height of Roman power. Among those who sought such recognition, he mentions that "The *Rhosikos* [ruler] was appointed to the position and honour of *epi tes trapezes* by Constantine the Great."⁷ Another version of this story appears in Gregoras' notebook, the so-called Planudean excerpts, the probable source of the passage in the *History*. In the earlier version, the title is bestowed by Augustus and confirmed by Andronikos Palaiologos (it is unclear whether Andronikos II or III is meant). In his study of the Planudean excerpts, Ihor Ševčenko has shown that, contrary to much previous speculation, the title was not actually bestowed on any ruler of Rus. Ševčenko concludes that confusion may have arisen through a mistranslation of the Slavonic *stol'*, which could mean "throne" or "table".⁸

However the story originated, it provides important clues about Gregoras' views. The Rus were, for him, an ancient people who, like the Gauls, Iberians, Celts and others mentioned in this section of the *History*, were part of the Roman *oikumene* and had maintained friendly contacts with the empire since pre-Christian times. They were, moreover, included in the category of "those who carry the servitude of [Roman] law", a phrase which Gregoras uses to introduce his discussion about the bestowal of titles, implying some form of political submission to the empire.⁹ Interestingly, whereas in the *History* Gregoras goes on to bemoan the loss or corruption of some titles over the centuries, his notes show that he believed the Rus title was still being used correctly in his own time. Although these assertions have no basis in fact, they help to contextualise Gregoras' generally positive, if often inaccurate, views about Rus which occur at several later points in the *History*.¹⁰

⁷ Nikephoros Gregoras, *Rhomaïke Historia*, CSHB, I–III, L. Schopen (ed.), Bonn 1829 – 1855, I, 239.

⁸ I. ŠEVČENKO, Some Autographs of Nicephorus Gregoras, *ZRVI* 8, 1964, 446–450.

⁹ Nikephoros Gregoras, op. cit., I, 238.

¹⁰ D. OBOLENSKY, Byzantium, Kiev and Moscow: A Study in Ecclesiastical Relations, in: *Byzantium and the Slavs*, Crestwood, NY 1994, 109–165 argues that Gregoras' discussion is *full, careful and well-informed*. Although Gregoras has some limited knowledge of Rus and its affairs, it is important to recognise that this is outweighed by the many glaring errors in his work.

In chapter twenty-six, writing in the voice of his interlocutor Agathangelos, Gregoras describes the population of *Rhos* as large and possessing a prosperous land which provides manifold wealth. He praises their piety, claiming that the people “have followed the laws of Orthodoxy without the slightest deviation and in the most simple and unproblematic way since accepting it according to their own wishes.”¹¹ Their simple faith meant that they rejected the heresy (as Gregoras saw it) of Palamism, which an unnamed metropolitan of Kiev condemned in the strongest possible terms.¹² Along with this admiration, however, Gregoras also reveals a certain condescension: “But I was amazed at how these people, despite being otherwise ignorant, managed this sensibly...”¹³ Clearly, then, the Rus enjoyed material abundance and their piety gave them the right instincts, but they were not sophisticated.

Despite these shortcomings, Gregoras finds much to praise about Rus. In chapter twenty-eight, he describes the collapse of the dome of the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in 1346, news of which reached an unnamed ruler of *Rhossia* (Simeon of Moscow), who became filled with divine zeal. This leads into another discussion about Rus, in which Gregoras repeats and expands on his earlier comments. He again describes the land as large and populous, and notes that it is located “between those mountains of the far north from which the *Tanais* [Don], the greatest of the rivers, springs, as well as the greater and smaller rivers which flow down and discharge into the *Maeotian* [Azov] and Caspian Seas.” Gregoras also gives a brief description of travel from Rus to Byzantium, in which one has the west wind and western ocean on the right, and the Scythians [Mongols] and east wind on the left. He goes on to explain that he wishes to emphasise the remoteness of Rus, whose people nevertheless care greatly about the repair of the cathedral. Upon hearing the news about the dome’s collapse, their pious prince “sent from there thousands of coins, as many indeed as he had already sent” for the repairs, and promised to send more if necessary. The Byzantines, by contrast, were largely unmoved, and the emperor was callous enough to give the money to his son-in-law instead of using it for its intended purpose.¹⁴

In chapter thirty-six, Gregoras reveals that his previous comments about Rus were not exhaustive, and that he had only reported as much as he thought was necessary in the context. Subsequent events had, however, made it necessary to return to this theme, and he notes once again the country’s great size, large population and productive land. He goes on to describe the rich silver mines and luxurious fur which contribute to its wealth, as well as certain fish which are highly prized as delicacies. Gregoras then declares “I need not say which of the plentiful exotic wares from there

¹¹ Nikephoros Gregoras, op. cit., III, 113.

¹² The translators of Gregoras’ work suggest that he is referring to the Byzantine Theognostos: Nikephoros Gregoras, *Rhomäische Geschichte*, I–VI, J. L. van Dieten – F. Tinnefeld (eds.), Stuttgart 1973 – 2007, V, 277.

¹³ Nikephoros Gregoras, op. cit., III, 114.

¹⁴ Nikephoros Gregoras, op. cit., III, 199–200.

bring them wealth”, but he has in fact just described them in some detail.¹⁵ This remark is presumably intended to signal his transition to the main subject of the chapter, i.e. the attempt to convert the ruler of Lithuania to Orthodox Christianity.

In the ensuing discussion, Gregoras shows his support for the cause of a united metropolitan see for Rus and Lithuania by stating that, when the Rus had accepted baptism, it had been decided that the entire people would be led by a single metropolitan (*arkhiereus*). This position is bestowed in turn on candidates from Rus and Byzantium.¹⁶ Gregoras then turns to the appointment of the Byzantine monk Theognostos as metropolitan in 1327. It had been necessary to move the metropolitan’s residence from its previous location, “called something like *Kugebon* [Kiev]” because of the Scythian [Mongol] devastation of the former capital. He explains that

This whole people of the *Rhos* are most populous and from ancient times have been distributed in many different places, having arrived at and been divided into some three or four realms and authorities. But when the proclamation of the faith of God later came there, most [regions] seized it, filling themselves with godly zeal for grace, and receiving holy baptism without trouble. But some here and there remained in their former state of sin.¹⁷

Gregoras asserts that Kiev was one of the regions which first accepted baptism, but that it is near the pagan region, whose people are extremely warlike and worship fire. This proximity was another reason for the metropolitan to move. A new residence was found in the city of *Volontimoiron* [Vladimir] which was very far from Kiev and ruled by an unnamed pious man, whose good deeds included sending money for the repair of the dome of the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom. In the course of this narration, Gregoras admits that he does not know whether the move of the metropolitan occurred recently or long ago, and whether Theognostos initiated it or not.¹⁸ Somewhat later in the chapter he returns to the topic of the pagan region, noting that the prince and his people worship the sun, are extremely warlike, and live in “secure places near the border with Celts and Gauls, who live by the northern ocean and the island of Thule, whence Zephyr bursts forth and whither the sun journeys when it sets.”¹⁹ The rest of the chapter is devoted to describing further machinations within the church, as a result of which the

¹⁵ *Nikephoros Gregoras*, op. cit., III, 511–512.

¹⁶ *Nikephoros Gregoras*, op. cit., III, 512–513.

¹⁷ *Nikephoros Gregoras*, op. cit., III, 513–514.

¹⁸ *Nikephoros Gregoras*, op. cit., III, 514. In fact, the move occurred in 1299 at the instigation of Metropolitan Maximos. See G. M. PROKHOROV, Maksim, mitropolit Kiyevskiy i Vladimirskiy’, in: *Slovar’ knizhnikov*, I, 253–254.

¹⁹ *Nikephoros Gregoras*, op. cit., III, 517.

ruler of the pagan region refused to be baptised, claiming that the sun had more to recommend it than what he had seen of the church.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of Gregoras' account is its vagueness and contradictory or incorrect statements. Like his comments about the title of *epi tes trapezes*, much of Gregoras' further discussion about Rus is confused, despite his erudition and apparent interest in the region. Gregoras correctly identifies Rus as a northern country and home to the source of the Don and other rivers, and he makes some effort to connect contemporary practices to its early history. His claim about the alternation of Byzantine and Rus metropolitans from the time of the conversion is, however, highly unlikely.²⁰ Moreover, he contradicts himself, claiming first that the entire population of Rus gladly accepted Christianity, and then noting the resistance of the "pagan region", which is clearly Lithuania. Gregoras erroneously locates this area near Celts and Gauls living by the Northern Ocean and considers it to be one of the constituent principalities of Rus, instead of a separate political entity: "Three of the rulers [*hegemon*] of all Rus, together with their subjects, have the same Orthodox faith and are united with us, but the fourth one not in the least."²¹ The warlike prince of this area, as well as the pious ruler of Rus, are not named. Gregoras seems, in fact, to have conflated two Rus rulers: he describes Theognostos settling in Moscow, which happened in 1328 under Ivan I Kalita, but then implies that this same prince was responsible for sending money to repair the cathedral, which happened during the reign of Ivan's son Simeon.²² Regarding the move of the metropolitan of Kiev Gregoras has no knowledge of people or dates, and even when he does mention two specific place-names in this context, Kiev and Vladimir, he qualifies the former with the phrase "something like". But despite his hazy grasp of details, Gregoras' writings about Rus are generally positive and sympathetic, a certain degree of condescension notwithstanding. Rus was blessed, in his view, with a combination of piety and wealth.

²⁰ The office of metropolitan did in fact alternate between Rus and Byzantine incumbents between 1237 and 1378. Dimitri Obolensky argued that a formal agreement about this arrangement was concluded in the first half of the thirteenth century and that, even in the eleventh and twelfth, some native Rus metropolitans were nominated by local princes: OBOLENSKY, *Byzantium, Kiev and Moscow*, op. cit., 109–165. However, John Meyendorff, citing a patriarchal document which describes the appointment of a Rus metropolitan as exceptional, believed the practice was "accepted policy" rather than a formal agreement: MEYENDORFF, *Byzantium*, op. cit., 88–90. Given Gregoras' confusion about many aspects of Rus, his comment about the metropolitans should be treated with caution.

²¹ *Nikephoros Gregoras*, op. cit., III, 517. Ihor Ševčenko notes that Byzantine supporters of Lithuania generally considered it to be part of Rus, but does not address Gregoras' inconsistency regarding how much of the population originally accepted Christianity: I. I. SHEVCHENKO, *Nekotorye zamechaniya o politike konstantinopol'skogo patriarkhata po otnosheniyu k vostochnoy Evrope v XIV v.*, in: B. N. Florya (ed.), *Grecheskiy i slavyanskiy mir v srednie veka i ranneye novoe vremya*, (Slavyane i ikh sosedi, 6), Moscow 1996, 133–139.

²² *Nikephoros Gregoras*, op. cit., III, 514, 516.

Its people were favourably disposed toward Byzantium as the home of their mother church, and its prince was even willing to support the empire financially. The change in this attitude was entirely the fault of the emperor, who betrayed this generosity.

The sources of Gregoras' comments about the geography, history and politics of Rus are not clear, although inferences can be made. Despite never travelling to Rus himself, Gregoras was well connected in the cosmopolitan circles which included churchmen and diplomats who served in the region. Obolensky posits, for example, that Gregoras obtained information from the Byzantine metropolitan of Kiev Theognostos, about whom he wrote admiringly in his *History*, as discussed above.²³ References to Rus certainly appear in contemporary personal correspondence, such as the letter sent in 1331 – 1332 by Matthew, Metropolitan of Ephesus, to a "philosopher" in Constantinople whom Meyendorff tentatively identifies as Gregoras himself.²⁴ The letter refers to the restitution of property to the grand prince of Moscow following the death of a certain "Olekes".²⁵ Matthew's biographer concludes that Matthew sent the letter while on a diplomatic mission to Rus.²⁶ This type of communication continued in the next century between Photios, the Byzantine metropolitan of Kiev from 1408 – 1431, and his eventual successor, Isidore. Based on Isidore's surviving reply, Photios seems to have written him a letter describing feuding within the grand princely family and devastating raids by the Mongol khan Edigei in 1408 – 1410, which he survived by taking refuge in a suburban monastery.²⁷ Personal correspondence, then, must have provided some information about the politics and everyday realities of life in Rus. Although the surviving letters do not discuss geography, Gregoras may have obtained information about that topic through similar channels.

Whatever Gregoras' sources, the subject continued to be of interest in the next generation, as demonstrated by the writings of Gemistos Plethon. One of the most prominent late Byzantine philosophers, he was born around the time of Gregoras' death, c. 1360, and lived until the year before the fall of Constantinople.²⁸ Although best known as a Neoplatonic philosopher, he was also the author of a little-studied geographical work entitled *Correction of Some Things Incorrectly Stated by Strabo*.²⁹ In addition to amending some of Strabo's assertions based on contemporary knowledge, it

²³ OBOLENSKY, *Byzantium, Kiev and Moscow*, op. cit., 114–115.

²⁴ MEYENDORFF, *Byzantium*, op. cit., 71.

²⁵ D. REINSCH, *Die Briefe des Matthaios von Ephesos im Codex Vindobonensis Theol. Gr. 174*, Berlin 1974, 155. Meyendorff suggests that "Olekes" is Alexander of Tver, but he died in 1339, some eight years after the letter was written.

²⁶ S. KOUROUSES, *Manouel Gabalas eita Matthaios Metropolitēs Ephesou*, Athens 1972, 251–252.

²⁷ *Isidore of Kiev, Epistolae Isidori hieromonachi (postea metropolitae Kijoviensis)*, in: W. Regel (ed.), *Analecta Byzantino-Russica*, St Petersburg 1891, 70–71.

²⁸ A.-M. TALBOT, Plethon, George Gemistos, in: *ODB*, A. P. Kazhdan (ed.), Oxford et al., 1991, III, 1685; C. M. WOODHOUSE, *George Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes*, Oxford 1986.

²⁹ Published in A. DILLER, *A Geographical Treatise by Georgius Gemistus Pletho*, *Isis* 27/3, 1937, 441–451.

includes several chapters of new information about the limits of the inhabited world, including the northern regions of Rus, to which one chapter is devoted. Plethon discusses different aspects of Rus from Gregoras, focusing on geographical and anthropological observations. He first acknowledges that the country has been known by various names: “We also ascertained from greater numbers of historical accounts about [the land] now called *Rhosia*, but formerly Sarmatia...” This observation, probably the only one of its kind in Byzantine literature, is highly significant, showing a rare interest in, and awareness of, foreign place-names and their changing renderings over time in Greek. Plethon goes on to describe some of the waterways of northern Rus, mentioning the Cold [White] Sea, the *Ouenedikos* Bay [Baltic Sea] and the river *Tivinos* [Dvina]. He also mentions one of the exotic animals, probably a walrus, to be found there: “In [the Cold Sea] appear amphibious fish which have large white horns, which they plant firmly on the earth whenever they go out on dry land, and then proceed by dragging themselves toward them.” The local tribes, which he names as the *Permioi* [Permians], *Mordibai* [Mordvins] and *Mestorai* [Meshchera?], are described as poor and subsisting off hunting and fishing in lakes which feed the *Rhas* [Volga].³⁰

Plethon shares with Gregoras the sense of Rus being located on the fringes of the known world, and both authors emphasise its northern climate and prominent waterways. Otherwise, however, the accounts are noteworthy for their lack of common themes, with Plethon ignoring contemporary politics in favour of observations about ethnography and the natural world. Even the authors’ discussions of “fish” do not overlap, since Gregoras is interested in delicacies for export and Plethon in conveying the exotic nature of the local fauna. Plethon also differs from Gregoras by naming and describing several geographical features and ethnic groups with a relatively high degree of accuracy, showing a command of specific facts unlike the vague references found in Gregoras’ work.

Although the precise source of this knowledge is unclear, Plethon’s work can be situated both within and beyond the Byzantine intellectual world. He is known to have attended the Council of Florence, where he obtained information about Scandinavia from Paolo Toscanelli, whose source was the Danish cartographer Claudius Clavus. Plethon may also have consulted with the Byzantine traveller Laskaris Kananos, who made an extensive journey around the Baltic, the British Isles and Iceland in the late 1430s.³¹ Aubrey Diller plausibly speculates that Plethon’s source about Rus was Metropolitan Isidore of Kiev, who also attended the council. There is also some indication that he discussed his interests with Italian cartographers: the *mappa mundi* of

³⁰ DILLER, A Geographical Treatise, op. cit., 444.

³¹ A. DILLER, The Autographs of Georgius Gemistus Pletho, *Scriptorium* 10, 1956, 27–41; J. BLOMQVIST, The Geography of the Baltic in Greek Eyes – From Ptolemy to Laskaris Kananos, in: B. Amden et al. (eds.), *Noctes Atticae: Articles on Greco-Roman Antiquity and its Nachleben*, Copenhagen 2002, 36–51.

Fra Mauro, completed about a decade after the Council, makes similar observations about the Permians to those of Plethon, describing them as living in the furthest north and being “of great height and pale and strong and high-spirited, but not industrious. They live by hunting and dress in the skins of animals, and have bestial customs.” Three further comments mention their subterranean dwellings and dependence on fur-bearing animals for trade, meat and clothing. The map also lists the *Meschiera* and *Mordua*, among others, as people who inhabit *Rossia*.³²

Although Plethon’s direct influence on Fra Mauro cannot be proven, their work suggests a growing awareness of, and interest in, the far-flung parts of Rus among European intellectuals of this period.³³ The subject of the Permians is found again in the work of Plethon’s student Laonikos Chalkokondyles (c. 1430 – 1470), whose *Histories* include, among descriptions of many other lands, an excursus about Rus. At the end of this section, he notes that the Permians live further north than the Rus, but speak the same language. Echoing his teacher, he states, “It is said about the Permians that they are a race who live mostly by hunting and...”³⁴ Although the manuscript breaks off at this point, it seems that Chalkokondyles is not directly quoting Plethon, but merely touching on the same theme. In other respects, however, Chalkokondyles’ account diverges from that of his teacher. For example, whereas Plethon asserts that the term *Rhosia* has replaced the earlier Sarmatia, Chalkokondyles uses only the latter. He also shows more interest in cultural matters, noting that the Rus “are a race that for the most part speaks the language of the Illyrians [Slavs]” and that they follow the Greek form of Christianity and have a Greek bishop. Furthermore, “They also use the customs of the Greeks but their dress is similar to that of the Scythians [Mongols].”³⁵ Chalkokondyles’ geographical observations are more detailed than those of Gregoras. He notes that Rus extends “from the nomadic Scythians [Mongols] to the Wallachians and Lithuanians”,

³² P. FALCHETTA, *Trascrizione integrale delle iscrizioni del Mappamondo di Fra Mauro (ca. 1450) conservato presso la biblioteca marciana di Venezia*, http://geoweb.venezia.sbn.it/cms/images/stories/Testi_HSL/FM_iscr.pdf (retrieved 9 June, 2017). I am grateful to Timothy Hill for assistance with the Italian text. For further discussion of these details of the *mappa mundi* see S. N. GUKOVA, *K voposu ob istochnikakh geograficheskogo traktata Plifona, Vizantiiskii Vremennik* 44, 1983, 92-93, which also notes the likelihood that Fra Mauro and Plethon had access to the same sources.

³³ The people of northern Rus were also encountered directly through mission work, as shown by the example of the fourteenth-century Byzantine monk Lazarus, who was sent to Novgorod as an emissary and went on to found a monastery on Lake Onega among the Sami, Chud and Samoyeds. His account, apparently dictated to a disciple shortly before his death, is not discussed here because it was not intended for a Byzantine audience: *Zhitiye Lazarya Muromskogo*, A. V. Pigin (ed.), *Kizhskiy vestnik* 8, 2003, 14–19.

³⁴ *Laonikos Chalkokondyles, The Histories*, I-II, A. Kaldellis (ed.), Cambridge, MA 2014), I, 214–215. The Permians, a Finno-Ugric tribe, did not speak the same language as the Rus. For a discussion of this problem see H. DITTEN, *Der Russland-Exkurs des Laonikos Chalkokondyles*, Berlin 1968, 44–45.

³⁵ *Laonikos Chalkokondyles*, op. cit., I, 212–213.

and from the Black Sea to the Arctic circle. Moreover, he cites place-names with confidence:

The [Sarmatian] races by the Black Sea starting from the so-called *Leukopolichnes* [White Town, i.e. Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi] are divided into principalities, namely *Moskhovion* [Moscow], *Kievos* [Kiev], *Tophari* [Tver], and *Khorovion* [?], cities that are governed by tyrants and extend as far as what they themselves call Black [Sarmatia]. They call the races that live by the Ocean below the Arctic circle White [Sarmatia].³⁶

The city of *Ougkrates* [Novgorod] is described as being “in the direction of the Ocean”, and “richer and more prosperous than the other cities in Sarmatia” thanks to trade with western Europe.³⁷ The accuracy of these statements is mixed: in particular, the identity of *Khorovion* is mysterious. Hans Ditten suggests that it should be amended to Rostov or Pskov,³⁸ but given the frequency with which the ending -ov is found among East Slavonic place-names and the Byzantines’ notorious inaccuracy in rendering such names, the true meaning is probably impossible to establish. The accuracy of Chalkokondyles’ description of “Black Sarmatia” and “White Sarmatia” is also difficult to assess. Although the terms White and Black Rus existed at this time and are attested on maps, there was little consistency in the geographical areas to which they referred.³⁹

Chalkokondyles’ writings are thus in keeping with late Byzantine precedent in discussing a range of topics related to Rus. Yet the details of his excursus overlap with those of the other writers only tangentially and briefly: on the subjects of the Permians, the division of Rus into principalities and Mongol suzerainty. Collectively, these writings thus indicate the existence and circulation among late Byzantine intellectuals of a considerable amount of information about Rus, ranging from political history to the natural world to local ethnography. There was clearly a healthy interest in the region, which was considered worthy of serious study outside the context of appointments to the church hierarchy. Although the accuracy of these accounts varies, they show that Rus was not a mere *topos*, but a subject of some importance which was not out of place in learned discourse. Rather than repeating clichés or received wisdom, these discussions show the authors’ personal engagement with the subject in a manner which suited their own purposes. Gregoras’ description of the Rus as “noble savages” whose piety shamed his decadent fellow countrymen was an aspect of his larger polemical agenda, while Plethon used information about Rus to enhance his geographical research

³⁶ *Laonikos Chalkokondyles*, op. cit., I, 212–213. I have retained the original “Sarmatia” instead of using Kaldellis’ translation of this term as “Russia”.

³⁷ *Laonikos Chalkokondyles*, op. cit., I, 214–215.

³⁸ DITTEN, op. cit., 24–28.

³⁹ DITTEN, op. cit., 28–35.

and Chalkokondyles surveyed its politics and culture as part of his broader comparative study. All of these approaches reveal the authors' own curiosity about the region, as well as their confidence that their discussions of it would attract the interest of their audiences.

Rus, then, had a role to play in the way late Byzantine writers conceived of their own country the world around them. Yet Rus not only served as a foil for late Byzantine society, but also provided reminders of the empire's past glories. At a time when the Byzantines were all too aware of their reduced circumstances, they could find comfort in accounts of their ancestors' achievements, such as the baptism of the large, rich and pious country to the north. The story of the conversion of Rus seems to have been relatively popular in late Byzantium, appearing in various permutations in a number of collections. Like the accounts discussed above, it includes little to no accurate information, but instead reveals the pride of authors and compilers in their country's earlier achievements.

There are few aspects of the conversion of Rus which are not extremely controversial, and the purpose of the present discussion is not to review the copious scholarship about it, still less to propose a new interpretation of the events. Rather, it will investigate how the conversion was described in late Byzantine texts as an aspect of the broader interest in Rus which is evident from that time. Sources from middle Byzantium place the baptism of Rus in the third quarter of the ninth century. The text closest to the events described, an encyclical letter written by the patriarch Photios in 867, claims that the fearsome *Rhos* (who had attacked Constantinople seven years before) had accepted a bishop and become enthusiastic converts.⁴⁰ In the middle of the next century, Constantine VII wrote a more detailed account of this mission, claiming that it had happened during the reign of his grandfather Basil I, rather than Basil's predecessor Michael III.⁴¹ Constantine's *Vita Basilii* describes, among Basil's many other achievements, his efforts to convert the Jews and strengthen the faith of the recently-baptised Bulgarians, who were "not yet firmly committed to the Good."⁴² The next chapter focuses on the *Rhos*, relating that the emperor made a peace treaty with them and "persuaded them to partake of the salutary baptism, and made them accept an archbishop who had received his ordination from Patriarch Ignatios." This unnamed archbishop, after being summoned by the (likewise anonymous) Rus leader and his

⁴⁰ Photios, *Photii patriarchae constantinopolitani epistulae et amphilochia*, I–VI, B. Laourdas – L. G. Westerink (eds.), Leipzig 1983, VI, 50.

⁴¹ Although there is no reason to believe that Basil initiated the mission, he may well have continued to provide support for it, as hinted by the discovery of a silver *miliaresion* of the emperor at Gorodishche, one of the early Varangian settlements in what is now northern Russia: S. FRANKLIN – J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus 750 – 1200*, London 1996, 54–55.

⁴² Constantine VII, *Chronographiae quae Theophanis continuati nomine fertur liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur*, CFHB, 42, I. Ševčenko (ed.), Berlin 2011, 308–313.

council, told them about some of the miracle stories of the Old and New Testaments. Before continuing with their instruction, the people demanded to see something similar for themselves, “especially something like that which, as you say, <happened to> the three young men in the furnace”, and asked that the archbishop throw the Gospel book into a bonfire. The book was, of course, not consumed, and “[w]hen the barbarians beheld this, they were astounded by the greatness of the miracle, and abandoning all doubts, began to be baptized.”⁴³ This list of Basil’s achievements – conversion of the Jews, support for the Bulgarians and baptism of Rus – appears in similar form in the *Synopsis historion* of John Skylitzes, composed in the late eleventh century.⁴⁴

By the late Byzantine period, the story of the baptism of Rus was circulating independently of the biography of Basil I and had undergone considerable embellishment. This text, known as *Narratio de Russorum ad fidem Christianam conversione*, can only be dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century and is found in two fifteenth-century manuscripts from Paris and Patmos.⁴⁵ In this version of the story, the leader of the *Rhosoi* is named *Vlantimeros*, who is described as the latest in a long line of great rulers. He is said to be concerned about the fact that his people follow a variety of faiths: Jewish, Persian, “Syrian” and “Hagarene”. His advisers cannot tell him which one he should choose, but observe that, since Rome and Constantinople are the best places in the world, one of them must be home to the correct faith. Vladimir therefore sends a group of prominent men to Rome, and they arrive very quickly and receive instruction from the pope himself. They return so impressed that they are prepared to convert, but the advisers insist that they should also visit Constantinople. The prominent men reach the city after a difficult journey and appear before Basil I, who arranges for them to be taken to a service in the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom on a feast day. The men declare afterwards that they have witnessed angels, leave immediately for Rus, and tell Vladimir, “We do not deny that we beheld great and magnificent things before in Rome, but all of the things which were seen by us in Constantinople astound the human mind.”⁴⁶ Vladimir then requests missionaries, and Basil sends an unnamed archbishop (*arkhiereus*) and two other men, Cyril and Athanasios, who baptise the Rus people and teach them the faith. Seeing, however, that they are “barbaric and inarticulate,”⁴⁷ Cyril and Athanasios are not able to teach them

⁴³ *Constantine VII, Chronographiae*, op. cit., 312–317.

⁴⁴ John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811 – 1057*, J. Wortley (ed.), Cambridge: 2010, 155–160.

⁴⁵ The Patmos text is published in *Narratio de Russorum ad Fidem Christianam conversione*, in: *Analecta Byzantino-Russica*, op. cit., 44–51. Although the edition of the Paris manuscript was unavailable for consultation, it contains only insignificant differences: P. SCHREINER, Ein wiederaufgefundener Text der *Narratio de Russorum Conversione* und einige Bemerkungen zur Christianisierung der Russen in byzantinischen Quellen, *Byzantinobulgarica* 5, 1978, 297–303.

⁴⁶ *Narratio de Russorum*, op. cit., 49.

⁴⁷ *Narratio de Russorum*, op. cit., 50.

the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet, but instead devise thirty-five new letters (i.e. the Cyrillic alphabet), which are listed by name. The last episode in the story is the miracle of the Gospel book, which is performed by the archbishop. It is very similar to the version in the *Vita Basilii* but is chronologically out of sequence, because in the context of the *Narratio* the Rus had already accepted baptism.

Scholars have tended to approach the *Narratio* as a source for the conversion of Rus, which has led to disappointment. Ivan Dujčev complains that “the first part, which conflates information about the conversion in the time of Basil I with the events of 988, does not contain anything of value,” a sentiment which is echoed by Sergey Ivanov.⁴⁸ As a source for late Byzantine attitudes about Rus, however, it has more to offer. The fact that the story retained its interest in the thirteenth century and later, despite taking place in a period which was already remote, is in itself noteworthy. The circulation of the *Narratio* indicates that it was a source of fascination and pride to its audience, probably because it showed their own country in a flattering light. Its accuracy was secondary to the fact that it enhanced Byzantine prestige by showing that the baptism was a significant achievement. The story emphasises that Rus was not an obscure country, but had had many great leaders. The remark that the people practiced established religions, rather than paganism, may be an attempt to convey the difficulty of converting them. The positive portrayal of Rome is also significant: unlike the parallel passage in the *Rus Primary Chronicle*, in which Vladimir’s envoys report that they “saw no beauty” in the ceremonies of the “Germans,”⁴⁹ the *Narratio* shows that Orthodox Christianity must have been very awe-inspiring indeed to overcome the envoys’ positive impressions of Catholicism. The passage about the invention of the Slavonic alphabet also bolsters Byzantine pride by praising Cyril and Athanasios as well-versed in both sacred and secular learning, in contrast to the lack of sophistication of the Rus. The story thus propagates the Byzantines’ idealised view of themselves – as a powerful empire with a civilising mission and a church which was more attractive than that of Rome – at a time when this was further than ever from the truth.

Although the *Narratio* is by far the most detailed Byzantine account of the baptism of Rus, the story clearly had a strong appeal. Elements of it, taken from the *Narratio* and other sources, appear in a number of late Byzantine compilations. Nikephoros Xanthopoulos included or intended to include it in the history of the Church which he wrote in the 1320s.⁵⁰ Although the extant narrative stops at 610, short

⁴⁸ I. DUJČEV, *Le testimonianze bizantine sui SS. Cirillo e Metodio*, in *Medioevo bizantino-slavo*, I–III, Rome 1965 – 1971, II, 38; S. A. IVANOV, “*Pearls before Swine*”: *Missionary Work in Byzantium*, D. Hoffman (trans.), (Monographies, 47), Paris 2015, 135.

⁴⁹ *The Pověst’ vremennykh lët: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, Harvard Library of Early Ukrainian Literature, X/1–3, D. Ostrowski (ed.), Cambridge, MA, 2003, II, 108,14–108,16.

⁵⁰ S. PANTEGHINI, *Die Kirchengeschichte des Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos*, *Ostkirchliche Studien* 9, 2009, 248–266.

summaries of chapters about the next three centuries also survive. According to these, chapter twenty-two described how “the people of the Bulgarians accepted Christianity” during the reign of Michael and Theodora. The next chapter, about the reign of Basil I and his sons, included a section about “how the people of the *Rhos* received Christianity”.⁵¹ The conversions of the two peoples are also linked in a minor chronicle with entries dated between 780 and 1063, which survives in a manuscript from the sixteenth century. It includes a brief note about the baptism of the Bulgarians under Michael in 863 – 864 and a fuller account of the baptism of the *Rhosoi* under Basil I in its entry for 860 – 866 (despite the fact that the emperor’s reign started in 867), including an abbreviated version of the miracle of the Gospel book.⁵² A more plausible date is found in a miscellany from the second half of the fifteenth century, written partly by the teacher and scholar Michael Apostoles, which states that the *Rhos* were baptised in 881 – 882, during Basil’s reign. The next entry gives a brief account of the Rus attack on Constantinople “with ten thousand ships” in 941, during the reign of “Romanos the Elder”. This description is similar to the relevant passage of Skylitzes’ history, indicating that the compiler used this source for both events.⁵³ Another reference to an attack by the Rus is found in a late thirteenth-century manuscript. It includes a list of emperors from Julius Caesar to Romanos III, and provides supplementary information about events from the time of Constantine I until the joint reign of Michael III and Basil I. In the fifth year of Michael’s reign (i.e. 860) it notes that “the *Rhos* arrived in two hundred ships, and through the intercessions of the all-praiseworthy Mother of God were conquered by the Christians and by strength were beaten and destroyed.”⁵⁴

Basil I was widely credited with the baptism of Rus, but other versions of the story circulated as well, as shown by a continuation of the *Historia syntomos* of Patriarch Nikephoros in a sixteenth-century manuscript. This text notes that the conversion occurred during the reign of “Ioannikios”, which lasted twenty-four years, seven months and twenty-three days, a period which corresponds to the reign of John II Komnenos in the twelfth century. Peter Schreiner plausibly speculates that the chronicle’s source attributed the baptism to John I Tzimiskes in the tenth century, but that the entry was misplaced during recopying due to scribal error.⁵⁵ Only one known

⁵¹ Nikephoros Xanthopoulos, *Ecclesiasticae Historiae*, PG,CXLV–CXLVII, J.-P. Migne (ed.), Paris 1857 – 1866, CXLV, 617, 620.

⁵² P. SCHREINER, *Die byzantinischen Kleinchroniken*, I–II, Vienna 1977, I, 50–51. Schreiner notes that the declined form *Rhosoi* provides a *terminus post quem* of the eleventh century for the chronicle’s source: P. SCHREINER, *Die byzantinischen Kleinchroniken*, op. cit., II, 102–104. A lapse of several centuries between the events and the chronicle’s composition would also help explain the inconsistency of the dates and a mistake in the text, which states that the emperor, rather than the bishop, performed the miracle of the Gospel book.

⁵³ P. SCHREINER, Ein wiederaufgefundener Text, op. cit., 300–301.

⁵⁴ P. SHRAINER, *Miscellanea Byzantino-Russica*, VV 52, 1991, 151–160.

⁵⁵ P. SCHREINER, Ein wiederaufgefundener Text, op. cit., 299–300.

Byzantine source dates the baptism of Rus to the period when modern scholars place the final, definitive conversion under Vladimir. This text is found in a manuscript probably compiled in the early to mid-fourteenth century which includes epistolary and theological works, information about the bishops of various Rus cities, financial accounts, and two short chronicle-style entries for the years 863 – 864 and 989. Various editors have concluded that it was compiled for a Byzantine bishop of Rus (probably Theognostos) whose scribes made use of a text related to *The Primary Chronicle*. The entry for 863 – 864 is similar to (although not an exact translation of) the chronicle's account of the baptism of Bulgaria in the same year, and second entry, which states that "Volontimeros was baptised, who baptised all of Rhosia", is only one year removed from the date given in *The Primary Chronicle* for this event (988).⁵⁶

Like the late Byzantine discussions of contemporary Rus, the accounts of its earlier baptism show a great deal of variety. The miracle of the Gospel book appears in only two of the texts and the mission of Cyril and Athanasios in one, indicating that these events were not inseparable from the conversion story. Indeed, not a single common element is found in all of the texts about the baptism. Most, but not all, place the event during the reign of Basil I. Some connect it with the conversion of the Bulgarians, others with different Rus attacks on Constantinople. Some name the Rus leader as Vladimir, others do not. This jumble of dates and information provides no new insights into the conversion itself, but it does give some sense of the aspects of Rus history which attracted the interest of the Byzantines. It is hardly a coincidence that the conversion and the early attacks are the only events which merit any attention since, as discussed above, they show Byzantium in a positive light. Even a brief mention of these episodes without further embellishment demonstrates that the empire achieved both diplomatic and military triumphs over fearsome barbarians and played the leading role in turning them into respectable citizens of the Christian *oikumene*.

The late Byzantine discussions of contemporary Rus and the accounts of the conversion span a variety of styles and genres, from the classicising composition of Plethon to the more colloquial *Narratio*. This, combined with the diverse subject matter treated in the works, attests to the breadth of Byzantine interest in Rus. From the Byzantine perspective, this was a land with longstanding connections to the empire, possibly reaching back to the time of Constantine I and beyond. To be sure, hostilities were not unknown, from the long-ago attacks on Constantinople to the contemporary squabbles within the church hierarchy. More important for many authors, however,

⁵⁶ M. D. PRISELKOV – M. R. FASMER, Otryvki V. N. Beneshevicha po istorii russkoy tserkvi XIV veka, *Izvestiya Otdeleniya russkago yazyka i slovesnosti Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk* 21, 1916, 48–70; P. SCHREINER, *Die byzantinischen Kleinchroniken*, op. cit., I, 602–608, 677–678; II, 104–105, 139–140. A number of important observations and inferences about the sources of this text can be found in O. FYLYPCHUK, *Zabuta istoriya: khreshchennya knyazya Volodimira Svyatoho u Vat. gr. 840*, *Ruthenica* 13, 2016, 137–142. I am grateful to Oleksandr Fylypchuk for sharing his research on these texts.

was the fact that the Rus had been quick and enthusiastic converts to Orthodox Christianity. They provided much geographical and anthropological fascination and, best of all, had become wealthy and powerful, while still (mostly) accepting the authority of the mother church. All of this ultimately reflected well on Byzantium, whose intellectuals could look back with satisfaction on their empire's civilising influence on this exotic country.

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