

MEDIEVAL RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

PART I -11th Century Russian Literature

Apocrypha, Sermon on Law and Grace, Life Feodosiya Pechersky, Legend of Boris and Gleb

Introduction:

The oldest translation to survive from the 11th century is a decorated religious manuscript written on parchment. This work, written by the deacon Gregory, is the *Ostromir Gospel* (*Ostromirovo evangelie*). Written between 1056-1057, this Gospel also includes rites arranged by the days of the week. The *Apostle* (*Apostol*), which includes 21 books of the New Testament, contains the epistles of Jesus' disciples and accounts of their lives. After these works comes the *Sermon on Law and Grace* (*Novgorodskie sluzhebnye chet'i i mnei*), written in the years between 1095-1097 and containing sacred songs and hymns arranged by day and month. With the acceptance of Christianity proverbs from religious works began to be translated into Old Russian. The most important of these is the *Book of Psalms* (*Psaltyr'*), containing religious hymns.

At the same time during this period Byzantine historical works were translated into the Russian language. The best known of these is the *Alexandria* which contains legends and stories about Alexander the Great, his life and his victories. Another important translated work is the *Deeds of Devgeni* (*Devgenievo deyanie*), about the deeds of the Byzantine epic hero Digenis. All of these translated works were read by the princes, landowners, merchants and churchmen of that period, giving the Russian people the opportunity to become acquainted with other cultures. It is known that from the 11th century on wealthy families had their children, both boys and girls, taught to read and write. For example, Vladimir Monomakh's sister Yanka had a monastery built in Kiev and opened a school for girls' education there.

Apocrypha. The adoption of Christianity was brought about not only by the works cited above; apocryphal writings also played a major role in this process. *Apocrypha* is a Greek word meaning "things hidden away", and referred to a body of writings not accepted by the church as part of the Bible, but often claiming to be written by important religious figures. Groups considered heretical could spread their views by means of the Apocrypha; as a result, the church banned some apocryphal writings. The Apocrypha, translated first into Bulgarian and later into Russian, often treated the subjects of heaven and hell. The most famous of this category of writings is the *Travels of the Virgin around Hell* (*Khozhdenie bogoroditsy po mukam*), written in the 12th century.

Sermon on Law and Grace. Among the most important religious stories of the 11th century is the *Hilarion's Sermon on Law and Grace* (*Slovo o zakone i blagodati Ilariona*). The *Sermon* was written in the time of Yaroslav Mudriy by the first Russian bishop of Kiev, Hilarion, between 1037 and 1050, the Russian state's most brilliant period both politically and culturally. In the *Sermon* Hilarion compares the Old Testament with the New Testament.

The Life of Feodosiy Pecherskiy. In the second half of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th century we see the appearance of original biographies in Russia. The most important of these is *The Life of Feodosiy Pecherskiy* (*Zhitie Feodosiya Pecherskogo*) which relates the life of the abbot of the Pecherskiy Monastery in Kiev.

The Life of Feodosiy Pecherskiy was written by Nestor at the end of the 11th century. The subject of this work, written in the style of a hagiography, was the founder of the Pecherskiy Monastery in Kiev and its first abbot. The main purpose of the work is to praise the life of Feodosiy Pecherskiy.

The Legend of Boris and Gleb.

Another work written in the last years of the 11th century in the form of a biography is *The Legend of Boris and Gleb (Skazanie o Borise i Glebe)*, an anonymous work. However, in contrast to other biographies, instead of relating Boris and Gleb's entire lives it only describes how the two brothers died.

Readings

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p. 85-90.

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p.101-105.

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p. 153-160.

Questions

What are the Apocrypha? How did they influence the Russian religious mind?

Describe the cultural and the religious life during the reign of Yaroslav the Wise.

What do Medieval Russian records from the 11th century reveal about the style of writing?
How do the writings about saints' lives differ from modern biographical stories?

PART II - 12th Century Russian Literature

Primary Chronicle, The Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel, Testament of Vladimir Monomakh, The Tale of Igor's Campaign

Introduction:

The most important work written in the period between the end of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th century is the *Primary Chronicle (Povest' vremennyh let)*. Other important works from the early 12th century are *The Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel (Khozhdenie igumena Daniila)*, the *Testament of Vladimir Monomakh (Pouchenie Vladimira Monomakha)*, and *The Tale of Igor's Campaign (Slovo o polku Igoreve)*.

Primary Chronicle. The *Primary Chronicle* consists of manuscripts written by Nestor in the Pecherskiy Monastery in Kiev some time in the first half of the 12th century, and covers the history of Russia between the years 1040-1118. The *Chronicle* begins with the genealogy of the Slavs.

The Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel. *The Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel* is an account of the Abbot Daniel's journey to the Holy Land between 1106-1113.

Testament of Vladimir Monomakh. The *Testament of Vladimir Monomakh* holds an important place in the literature of the 11th and 12th centuries. The work is written in the form of a will addressed to Vladimir Monomakh's children shortly before his death.

The Tale of Igor's Campaign. Another significant work composed in the last years of the 12th century is *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*. The *Tale* was first brought to scholarly attention in the 18th century by the manuscript collector Musin Pushkin. It was written in the principality of Kiev-Chernigov in a period when the Kievan state was divided among feudal princes, its political and cultural importance had been lost, and campaigns against the Cumans ended in defeat.

Readings

Mirsky, D.S., *A History of Russian Literature, From Its Beginnings to 1900*, Vintage Books Edition, 1958, p. 3-17.

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p. 43-83.

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p. 43-84.

Roman Jakobson, "The Puzzles of the Igor' Tale", *Selected Writings. IV.*, pp. 380-410.

Mann, R., *The Forgotten Text of Nikolai Golovin: New Light on the Igor Tale*, http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/26i/06_26.1.pdf

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p. 167-190.

The Tale of Igor's Campaign

<http://faculty.washington.edu/dwaugh/rus/texts/igortxt2.htm>

Russian Epic Studies, Edited by Roman Jakobson and Ernest J. Simons, American Folklore Society, Philadelphia, 1949.

Dietrich, A., *13th -15th Century Russian Accounts of Constantinople and their Value as Historical Sources*, Russian Literature, Elsevier Publishing, Netherland, 2006.

Majeska, G.P., *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the 14th and the 15th Centuries*. Dumbarton Oaks Studies, Washington DC, 1984. <http://libgen.info/view.php?id=673468>

Questions

What different literary genres are found in the Primary Chronicle? What are the characteristics of the Chronicle?

Talk about the style and structure of the Tale of Igor's Campaign.

Talk about the period in which the Tale was written.

Read the Tale of Igor's Campaign and discuss how it is different from the earlier texts/

Why are the Russian travelers' accounts important?

PART III - 13th Century Russian Literature

Supplication of Daniil Zatochnik, The Battle on the River Kalka, The Tale of the Destruction of Riazan by Batu, The Tale of the Downfall of Russia, The Tale of Life of Aleksander Nevsky

Introduction:

Again, documents written on birch bark at the beginning of the 13th century have been found. The most important of these consists of the *Novgorod Birch bark Writings (Novgorodskaya berestyana gramota)* from around the year 1200, and personal and commercial letters.

The most important works of this century are the *Supplication of Daniil Zatochnik (Molenie Daniila Zatochnika)*, *The Battle on the River Kalka (Povest' o bitve na reke Kalke)*, *The Tale of the Destruction of Riazan by Batu (Povest' o razorenii Ryazani Batyem)*, *The Tale of the Downfall of Russia (Slovo o pogibeli Russkoy zemli)* and *The Tale of Life of Aleksander Nevsky (Zhitie Aleksandra Nevskogo)*.

Supplication of Daniil Zatochnik. An important early manuscript written in the 13th century is *Supplication of Daniil Zatochnik*, in two versions, the *Supplication* and the *Address*, found in copies from the 16th and 17th centuries. Both are believed to derive from an original version composed in the last decades before the Tatar invasions.

The Tale of the Battle on the River Kalka. The consequences of the Mongol invasions are depicted in the *Tale of the Battle of the River Kalka*, which survives in four separate versions: 1 - Lavrent'yev chronicle, 2 – First Novgorod chronicle, 3 - Īpat'yev chronicle, 4 - Tverskiy manual.

The Tale of the Destruction of Riazan by Batu. Written in the mid-13th century, *The Tale of the Destruction of Riazan by Batu* centers on the historical events during the Tatar's invasion of Ryzan on December, 1237.

The Tale of the Downfall of Russia. Another important composition from the same period is the *Tale of the Downfall of Russia*. It is an anonymous work focusing on the Tatar invasion of Russian territory. However, a complete version of the *Tale* does not exist.

The Tale of Life of Aleksander Nevsky. *The Tale of the Life of Alexander Nevsky*, written at the end of the 13th century, relates the life of Alexander Nevsky (1221-1262) and the important events that occurred during his reign. The main subjects of this work written after the death of Alexander Nevsky are the wars with the Livonian knights at Lake Cud, with the Swedes at Lake Neva, and his victories in other wars.

Readings

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p. 193-198, 224-235, 249-255.

Petäys, M., *The political narrative of the Life of Alexander Nevskiy as an instrument of*

Russian identity and order,

http://www.uta.fi/conference/PAG/PAG_papers_mari_maki_petays.pdf

Supplication of Daniil Zatochnik <http://clover.slavic.pitt.edu/zatochnik/>

Questions

Are there any stylistic changes in writings after the Mongol conquest?

Which Medieval Russian sources talk about the Mongol conquest? How are the Mongols described in the tales?

Describe the major events which occurred in the 13th century and their significance.

PART IV -14th Century Russian Literature

Story about the Bloody Battle of Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich with Mamai , Zadonshchina, Story about the Bloody Battle of Mamai, The Life of Metropolitan Peter, The Story about Timur Aksak

Introduction:

The most important literary works of the 14th century are the *Story About the Bloody Battle of Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich with Mamai (Povest' o poboishche velikogo knyazya Dmitriya Ivanovicha na Donu c Mamaem)*, *Zadonshchina (Zadonshchina)*, *Story About the Bloody Battle of Mamai (Skazanie o Mamaevom poboishche)*, *The Life of the Metropolitan Peter (Zhitie metropolita Petra)*, and *The Story About Timur Aksak (Povest' o Temir Aksake)*.

The themes of almost all works composed in this period is the establishment of the centralized Russian state, the unity of Russian territory, the struggles to re-establish the independence of the the lands invaded by the Tatars, and the crushing defeat inflicted on the leader of the Golden Horde, Mamai Khan, at the Battle of Kulikovo in the late 14th – early 15th centuries.

Story about the Bloody Battle of Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich with Mamai. One of the first works of the 14th century, the *Story about the Bloody Battle of Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich with Mamai* relates events prior to the Battle of Kulikovo. The epic ends with the murder of Mamai by Tokdamish, Tokdamish becoming the Golden Horde's new khan, the failure of the Russians (who had been weakened after the Battle of Kulikovo) to muster the courage to start a new war against the Golden Horde which was marching on Moscow, the siege of Moscow and the Russians' agreement to pay tribute.

Zadonshchina. Another work composed in the last years of the 14th century and whose subject is the Battle of Kulikovo is the *Zadonshchina*, written by Sofoniy. It relates how the failure of the princes in Kayala to unite owing to the disputes among them resulted in Prince Igor's defeat. Inspired by the rhetoric in *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, this work seems to criticize the defeat described in *The Tale* and shows how victory should have been won.

Story about the Bloody Battle of Mamai. The main theme of this work written in the mid-15th century is the unity and integrity of the princes. The predominant idea in the work is the necessity for the Russian princes to unite in the war with Mamai for the sake of the Russian lands.

The Life of Metropolitan Peter. Prepared by Prokhor of Rostov and re-written by Kiprian in the 15th century, *The Life of the Metropolitan Peter* appears to be a work in which Kiprian defends himself through the personality of Peter.

The Story about Timur Aksak. Composed of two parts, the first part of *The Story about Timur Aksak* contains a legendary biography of Timur. The second part relates how an icon of the Virgin Mary was brought from Vladimir to Moscow after it was learned that Timur was on the borders of Russia, and Timur's withdrawal from Russian territory.

Readings

Zenkovsky, S.A., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*, Meridian, 1974, p. 211-223.

Skazanie o poboishche velikogo knyazya Dmitriya Ivanovicha na Donu c Mamaem
<http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/rus8/Mamaj/text.phtml?id=895>

Zadonshchina
http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Zadon.html

Zhitie metropolitana Petra *people.ds.cam.ac.uk/jrh11/ptrmetpar.doc*

5- *Povest' o Temir Aksake*
http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/History/Article/pov_temir.php

Questions

What sources mention the battle of Kulikovo?

Was the battle of Kulikovo the end of Mongolian domination?

What is the connection between the *Zadonshchina* and the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*? What similarities do you see to the *Tale*?