

# MEDIEVAL RUSSIAN CULTURE

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Life Style, Religious Beliefs, Art and Architecture

## *Introduction:*

The first inhabitants of the lands of Rus survived primarily by hunting and, to a lesser degree, agriculture. Since the territory in which they had settled consisted of swamps and forests it was not particularly conducive to agriculture, with the result that hunting, beekeeping, fishing and the fur trade were the most important activities in making a living. They could farm only by cutting trees and then working the fields they had created. At the same time, the forests provided the East Slavic tribes with the materials to make timber houses, wooden plates, and shoes and clothing from tree bark.

The East Slavs' commercial, economic and political relations with their neighbors (the Finns, Balts, Iranian tribes, Byzantines and other Slavic tribes), together with their acceptance of Christianity created the need for a writing system unique to their language. The transition from paganism to Christianity took place in the 10th century, and the ancient culture Byzantium, one of the most advanced in that period, was assimilated by the Russians.

When Prince Vladimir accepted the Eastern Orthodox faith in 988, he began the process of importing into Rus' of a large collection of religious works that had been translated during the previous century from Greek into the the Slavic language. These literary works formed the base for the development of literature in Rus'.

In addition to translated literature, the writing of original literature flowered in Rus' in the 11th and 12th centuries. All literary activity was conducted by churchmen, so the works of this period were either clearly religious in content or else displayed a strong religious influence. The literature produced in Kievan Rus' consisted of chronicles, homiletic works, and saints' biographies.

The Russians did not blindly adopt the customs of outsiders, but adopted them by adapting them to their own culture. In the villages it is impossible to find traces of these foreign customs which were seen more as a form of oppression in the large cities. It is clear that the conservative Russian villages preserved these ancient customs.

Prior to the adoption of Christianity the Russian people worshiped pagan gods, fairies, spirits, the earth, trees, stones, fire, the sun and water. In order to cure people of illness the Russians would place them in trees whose trunks were split or broken, seek sacred stones, and offer them to the forests, lakes, and wells. The burials of princes and nobles become elaborate rituals; burial mounds were made for the dead, and one of their wives or slaves was buried with them. After the burial competitions were arranged and memorial meals were given.

The Russians' religion was also based on the influence of hunting and agriculture, and for these people things such as fields, forests, rivers, lakes, pools, houses, and stables held great importance. As a result their religious thinking and emotions were formed within the framework of this life. These people who obtained their living from hunting and from the earth sought the aid of supernatural powers to protect them from difficulties and dangers they encountered in their daily lives and to live in peace, even giving these powers a corner in their homes.

The acceptance of Christianity in Kievan Russia began a new era in Russian history. In the late 10th century the centers of eastern and western Christianity were Constantinople and Rome. By accepting Christianity from Byzantium the Russians moved in the direction of Byzantine civilization, and were thus isolated from Rome, and western culture. Through Byzantium the Russians took the customs of Near Eastern, Greek and Christian civilizations "ready-made", but adopted them by giving them a uniquely Russian character. The political hegemony of princes recognized by the Orthodox Church in Byzantium was carried to Kievan Russia also, and was the reason for the princes' consolidation of their power. At the same time, Christianity ended the separation between the indigenous and foreign tribes, merging these peoples with one another. Not only the Slavic tribes, but the Finnish tribes, too, were forced to accept Christianity, and thus, the first step in the new religion's spread from Kiev to Lake Ilmen. As soon as Christianity had been accepted, beginning with Kiev churches and monasteries were constructed, icons made and craftsmen were brought from Byzantium. Kiev became a religious center; the Metropolitan of Kiev was appointed from Constantinople and became the highest ranking religious leader in Russia. The first Metropolitan for the Russians was Greek, and this situation that would continue to 15th century. In 1051 the Metropolitan Ilarion, a Russian, was accepted by Constantinople, but remained in his post for only one year. The rules for the churches in Russia (Nomokanon) were also brought from Byzantium.

The 15th century was the period in which the Moscow church declared its independence. The Metropolitan of Moscow, Isidore, who had signed the declaration of the Council of Ferrara-Florence reuniting the eastern and western churches, was removed from his position. The newly appointed Metropolitan, Iona, was the Metropolitan of Moscow and thus the head of the independent Orthodox Church. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Moscow's dream of becoming the Third Rome resulted in Moscow's status as a patriarchate being accepted.

The Muscovite period lasted from approximately 1400 to 1700. After tentative attempts, around 1480 Moscow became the unquestioned capital, and the pinnacle of Muscovite literary culture was reached in the 1550s, during the reign of Tsar Ivan the Terrible. However, the writers of Moscow did not continue the literary innovations which appeared toward the end of the Kievan period. Rather, they created strict imitations of existing literary genres; their main achievement was the extensive collections of chronicles and hagiographies which they compiled in the 16th century. The most distinctive characteristic of this period's literature is its conscious service of state policies.

In the 16th century the Church was completely under the control of the state, so much so that Ivan IV removed the Metropolitan Philipp from his post, and going further, he later had him killed. In this period the struggles between two church groups, the *Possessors* and *Nonpossessors* ended with the victory of the *Possessors*, and both the state's power and the Church's properties increased more.

Known as the Time of Troubles, the 17th century was a period in which the Russian church turned its back on Catholic politics. The Patriarch Filaret, who had assumed position after the death of the Patriarch Germogen, gained fame with anti-Catholic policies. As he was also the father of Tsar Mikhail Romanov, he was given the title *Great Lord*.

Russian art and architecture prior to the acceptance of Christianity consists of idols from the pagan period made of wood and stone, and burial mounds. In the 10th century we see that wood craftsmanship held an important place, while in the 11th century we can see an increase in the number of structures made from stone. In the second half of the 12th century and early years of the 13th century both churches and princes' palaces were made of stone. These structures display an architectural style that displays a synthesis of Byzantine elements combined with local traditions.

In the late 14th century and early 15th century the murals of the Greek artist Feofan Grek in Novgorod and Moscow bear witness Russian painting. The icons of the monk Andrei Rublev were the masterpieces of Russian icon painting which was in its golden age in this period.

The two schools of architecture opened in Novgorod and Pskov left their mark on Russian architecture in the 15th century. The Moscow School of Architecture, established on the basis of the architectural traditions of Pskov and Novgorod, later became one of the most important schools.

The building of stone churches and castles continued in the 16th century. Churches and cathedrals built in this period show the influence of Italian architecture.

In 17th century architecture, however, the main building material is again wood. The wooden tsar's palace in Kolomenski is decorated with wood carvings and colorful paintings on the ceiling.

The story of Russian literature begins in 988 - a date of great importance in Russian political and cultural history, when the ruler of Kievan Rus officially accepted Christianity and made it the new faith of his realm. Prior to this date there was no written literature in Rus, but with his conversion Prince Vladimir laid the foundation for what is now known as medieval Russian literature, although it would not attain its true form — on the basis of the literature which survived the destruction of the Mongol invasions - for a number of years thereafter. But the eastern Slavs received an alphabet created by Cyril and Methodius, and also became heirs to the extensive Byzantine cultural heritage which had already been and would later be translated from the Greek.

The needs of the church were clearly predominant in the foreign works which were translated during this period: almost all were from Greek originals, and religious in nature.

Written in 1056-1057, the *Ostromirovo evangeliye* (The Ostromir Gospel) is the oldest Russian manuscript which can be securely dated. Hilarion's *Slovo o zakone i blagodati* (Sermon on Law and Grace) is another notable work of Old Russian literature.

Hagiography, or biographies of the saints, was the most common genre of Old Russian literature, with a number of works from the earliest period. Among these surviving works are a chronicle and two hagiographies of Boris and Gleb, the first Russian saints.

*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, an epic poem about Prince Igor's raid against the Polovtsy (Kipchak), his capture, and his escape is one of the masterpieces of Old Russian literature. The Campaign was written some time between 1185 and 1187 and was re-discovered in 1795 by Count Musin Pushkin. However, the manuscript was destroyed in the Moscow fire of 1812. Fortunately, a copy has survived which had been made for Catherine II. A number of scholars have questioned the poem's authenticity, but the majority of experts now accept its authenticity. The destructive infighting among the Russian princes is the main topic of this work.

In the period between Vladimir's conversion and the Mongol invasions in the early 13th century, Kiev was the cultural and political center of Rus, as well the capital and seat of the new Russian church's metropolitan. It was not until the late 13th century that Kievan Rus was able to recover from the results of the Mongol invasion. The first areas to recover were Novgorod and Pskov, since they had not suffered from the raids of the Tatars. These cities, ruled by local assemblies, developed a unique culture. Leadership in the north-eastern lands was transferred from the Principality of Vladimir to Moscow in the early 14th century, which would then fight for leadership against Tver for another century. Functioning as one of the

border fortresses of north-eastern Russia, Moscow was a part of the Vladimir lands. By leaving Vladimir and settling in Moscow in 1324, Metropolitan Peter transferred the residence of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The late 14th century was marked by one of the most important events in Russian history - the first serious blow to the Golden Horde dealt by Dmitry Donskoy and his army in 1380.

Reflecting these political conditions, the chronicles and saints' lives served the interests of different local powers. A series of works in assorted genres, known collectively as the Kulikovo cycle, celebrated the first Russian victory over the Tatars in 1380 under the leadership of Grand Prince Dmitry Ivanovich Donskoy. A less-accomplished imitation of the Igor Tale, the Zadonshchina glorifies Dmitry Donskoy.

The most important hagiography of this period is the *Life of Saint Sergius of Radonezh* written by Epifany Premudry.

Mid -15th century Russia was characterized by bloody internal conflicts for the Moscow seat of the Grand Prince. Ivan III only managed to unite the Russian lands around the end of the 15th century, and ended Russia's subjugation to the Golden Horde after the Great standing on the Ugra River in 1480.

After the end of Mongol rule, Moscow gradually became the center of the most powerful state and through a combination of diplomacy and conquest was able to establish its rule over European Russia. Ivan III (1462-1505) saw his state as the heir to Byzantium and even referred to it as "the Third Rome". The Romanov dynasty was established a century later under Tsar Mikhail in 1613.

Concurrent with Moscow's increasing power, a number of writings appeared on the subject of "translation of empire", writings whose purpose was to legitimize Russia's imperial claims. They sought to do achieve this by creating elaborate genealogies and relating accounts of how imperial and ecclesiastical regalia were transferred to Russia. Among the most influential of these works was the monk Filofei's epistle to Vasily III (written between 1514 and 1521). In it he put forward the claim that in the wake of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (the second Rome), Moscow was the Third Rome of the only truly Christian state, Orthodox Russia. In essence, this proposition was an attempt to legitimize Russian ambitions.

A number of encyclopedic works, including the voluminous *Sermon on Law and Grace*, the *Code of Laws*, and other collections were indications of the consolidation of power in Moscow. One of the most well-known examples is the *Domostroy*, or rules for household management.

Some of the other well-known works of the period include stories designed to entertain; the *Tale of Peter and Fevroniya* is one such example. A merchant, Afanasy Nikitin, describes his voyages to Persia and India between the years 1466-1472 in his *Journey Beyond Three Seas*. However, one of the most significant aspects of this period is the fact that the Renaissance completely bypassed Russia, a fact which only helped to increase the cultural differences between Russia and the West. Russia would not produce the secular literature found in the West.

### *Readings*

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<http://www.revelation2seven.org/WebPages/SideLinks/TheRussianMind.htm>

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### *Questions*

Which deities did the pagan Russians worship?

How was Christianity reflected in Russian culture?

Is it possible to see the traces of pagan culture today?