

Saint Timofey Polotsk Outside Icelandic Sources:

Thorvald the Far Traveler. The Forgotten First Saint of White Russia?

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Fresco of Thorvald's arrival in Polotsk in a Catholic church of Rasony town

Everyone has heard about St Vladimir the Great baptizing Rus. It is also known that Christianity existed in Russia long before the reign of the Equal-to-the-Apostles St Vladimir. His grandmother St Olga, for example, by that time was already a Christian planting the seed of the Good News in the Russian lands inasmuch as she was able. Perhaps, the legendary Thorvald Konradsson the Far Traveller, a once forgotten, and now quite debated figure of the 10th century, was also one of the ancient enlighteners of the modern Belarusians' ancestors. What do we know about the life of this man, who was probably once revered as a saint in the Polotsk land?

Thorvald the Viking

Thorvald Konradsson was born in northern Iceland, near the Skagafjord circa 950. His parents named him after the Scandinavian god Thor, however, as the ancient chronicles testify, the young man never became an ardent follower of that terrifying deity. We know about Thorvald from The Baptism of Iceland saga, the Saga of Olav Tryggvason and other sources. These sagas, coupled with several European chronicles, give us legitimate reasons to consider Thorvald a historical person.

Like many of his peers, the young Konradsson joined the squad of the Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard, some of whose warriors were already familiar with Christianity. The future king of Denmark and England Sweyn often organized predatory raids into Ireland and Wales. In Ireland, Thorvald became acquainted with the truth of the Gospel that captivated his mind and heart. At that time he was already very different from his brothers in arms. He exchanged all his captured prey for prisoners, whom he then set free. After realizing that the military profession contradicted his Christian vocation, the young Viking decided to lay it down and set forth to Saxony. Here, around 980, he received Baptism from the local bishop Friedrek and persuaded him to go on a mission to Thorvald's native Iceland to enlighten his relatives and neighbors with the Light of Christ.

Thorvald and Friedrek. Millennium of Christianity Memorial in Iceland

Thorvald the Traveller

The missionaries arrived in Iceland in 981, around the time that Erik the Red discovered Greenland. At first, the mission went well. The preachers converted Thorvald's surrounding community to Christ. Preaching had to be Thorvald's task since the bishop did not speak the local language. They were also able to build the first church. However, their mission stalled at that point. The other Icelanders refused to give up their ancestors' faith, while the local boys began to compose offensive rhymes and sing them in the marketplace. Soon, Thorvald was

even summoned to a trial-duel, where he became the unwitting killer of his opponents. In retaliation the Icelanders destroyed Konradsson's church and manor forcing the missionaries to flee the country. Thorvald promised himself never to return to his homeland and settled in Norway, from where he began to make trade trips. He later became an itinerant preacher, imitating the Irish monastic tradition. Having visited Jerusalem, he arrived in Miklagard (Constantinople), where he, as a friend of the king of Denmark, was received with honor by the emperor Basil II the Bulgar Slayer. According to the Scandinavian sagas, the Byzantians bestowed on Thorvald diplomas allowing him to preach in the country of Gardariki (Scand. Rus) and be a representative of the "state of the Romans".

Thorvald the educator of Polotsk

Having visited Kiev, Thorvald decided not to stay there, but moved further along the Dnieper River until he arrived in the ancient Russian city of Polotsk. Here his mission among the local population, a significant part of which was of Varangian origin, was crowned with significant success. Historians disagree however about the possible prerequisites for such a success, as well as why Thorvald did not stay in Kiev. According to one of the versions, he arrives in Polotsk in 986. He was unable to stay in Kiev, because at that time the city was swept by a pagan reaction. Christian churches were being destroyed, while Prince Vladimir was forcing the Novgorod cult of Perun. Thorvald founded a temple in Polotsk and even built a monastery in honor of St. John the Baptist, which he himself ruled until his death in 1002. The fact of the monastery's existence is noted in many later chronicles. If Thorvald really arrived in Polotsk and founded a monastery there in 986, that suggests that Polotsk was baptized before the baptism of Kiev took place.

However, at that point the sagas contradict one another slightly in detail, while the question remains how, if at all, reliable their evidence can be considered. Other sources suggest that Thorvald's journey could have taken place in 1000, the year his native Iceland adopted the Christian faith. According to that version, Thorvald visited Polotsk only in 1002-3, about 15 years after Vladimir's baptism of Rus.

Ancient Polotsk

Regardless of which theory is true, the Icelandic preacher's visit to Polotsk with him founding a monastery, which existed there until the 15th century can be viewed as generally accepted. Moreover, as it is hypothesized by the researcher O. V. Loseva, Thorvald was a locally revered saint of the Polotsk diocese (Loseva, O. V., Russian Menologies of XI-XIV centuries), better known as Timofey Polotsk. Summing up all the above, we can say that the process of adopting Christianity in the lands of modern Belarus has been layered and versatile. We can also conclude that along with the influence of Orthodox Byzantium and the decisive contribution of St Vladimir's mission, there was also a strong factor of the Scandinavian preachers, who made a significant contribution to the enlightenment of Russia.

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Þorvaldur KOÐRÁNSSON's parents: Koðrán EILÍFSSON (c. 915-) and Járngerður "??" (c. 915-)

Þorvaldur KOÐRÁNSSON's brother: Ormur KOÐRÁNSSON (c. 940-)

Vigdís ÓLAFSDÓTTIR's other family: with Þorkell "krafla" ÞORGRÍMSSON (c. 958-c. 1030)

Family of Þorvaldur "víðförli" KOÐRÁNSSON and Vigdís ÓLAFSDÓTTIR

Husband:

Þorvaldur "víðförli" KOÐRÁNSSON (c. 945-)

Wife:

Vigdís ÓLAFSDÓTTIR (c. 960-)

residence family:

Iceland

Husband: Þorvaldur "víðförli" KOÐRÁNSSON

Name:

Þorvaldur "víðförli" KOÐRÁNSSON1

Sex:

Male

Father:

Koðrán EILÍFSSON (c. 915-)

Mother:

Járngerður "??" (c. 915-)

Birth:

c. 0945

Iceland

Death:

"??"

Iceland

Wife: Vigdís ÓLAFSDÓTTIR
Name:

Vigdís ÓLAFSDÓTTIR2

Sex:

Female

Father:

-

Mother:

-

Birth:

c. 0960

Iceland

Death:

"??"

Iceland

Sources

1.

Islendingabok, Islendingabok. Kristni saga, Vatnsdæla saga, Þorvalds þáttur víðförla, Svaða þáttur og Arnórs kerlingarnefs, Stefnis þáttur Þorgilssonar.

2.

Ibid. Hallfreðar saga, Þorvalds þáttur víðförla.

Here is a faithful, plain English translation, preserving the meaning and tone without adding interpretation.

Saint Varangian Thorvald Kodransson, the First Baptizer of the Russian Lands The Varangians and the Kolbyags

We usually imagine the Norman Varangians as shaggy bandits in horned helmets, whose favorite pastimes were no-rules fighting, drunkenness, and bloody human sacrifices to the fearsome pagan god of war Thor with his hammer. This is roughly how they are portrayed in the TV series Vikings.

But archaeological excavations of Varangian settlements show that most Normans (“northern people,” as the Franks called them) were engaged in peaceful occupations, the main one being fishing. As long as there was enough fish to sustain them, and as long as Varangian communities were small, none of the Normans even tried to live by robbery. Surprisingly, this peaceful way of life coincided with the cooling of Europe in the 4th–8th centuries.

Beginning in the 9th century, Europe became warmer, and cold-water fish disappeared or changed their migration routes. The Normans were faced with a choice: either follow the fish into cold western waters, to unknown lands, or engage in redistribution of property within Scandinavia and plunder beyond its borders.

Most “northern people” were not robbers, and therefore in the early 9th century Varangian fishermen settled the Faroe Islands, the Orkneys, the Shetlands, and Iceland, and in the 10th century reached Greenland and modern Canada. Those Varangians who chose the path of plunder went “into viking,” something like a Norman “Zaporizhian Sich,” became Vikings, tied axes to their boat hooks, and attacked neighboring lands. The Vikings’ weapon—the axe-hook, convenient for pulling an enemy boat closer and fighting without leaving one’s own ship (the drakkar)—was called a kolbyaga, and gave the Vikings another name: kolbyags. Sometimes the raids of Viking kolbyags were very successful. Thus, in the 11th century the Normans captured England and southern Italy. In addition, the Vikings, as defenders of the route “from the Varangians to the Greeks,” or the “Eastern Route” (as the Normans called it), were invited to Rus’ by the Novgorodian leader Gostomysl in the 10th century.

How Thorvald of Skagafjord Became an Icelandic Bishop

The man whose story we tell was not a Viking-kolbyag. He belonged to those Normans who were fishermen and travelers. He came from peaceful Iceland. At that time Iceland had a very

small population—no more than five thousand people. Many people knew one another and were related.

Thorvald Valdrunik, son of Kodran, was born in the north of the island of geysers sometime in the 960s. We know about him from three Scandinavian sagas (*Þorvalds þáttr víðförla*, *Kristni saga*, and *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*). His very name shows that his parents and priests named him after the god of war Thor. Yet war would become what Thorvald hated most in life.

In his youth, he entered military service—“like everyone else,” “for company,” together with young troublemakers from his native Skagafjord—serving the Danish prince Sweyn Forkbeard, who at that time was waging a long war against his father Harald Bluetooth for the throne. There he first heard legends about the one merciful God, Christ. He heard them from his fellow warriors, which is not surprising, since Sweyn’s retinue at that time consisted mainly of baptized Normans (the Danes accepted Christianity in 965). Sweyn himself, however, remained a pagan for a long time.

The unnatural war of a son against his father, in which young Thorvald was being forced to participate, contradicted both his patriarchal views and the teachings of the Christian faith he had heard about. Thorvald realized that the path of a mercenary warrior was closed to him. He laid down his sword. Or perhaps he simply did not want to kill people, deserted, and fled from Denmark to Saxony, which by then had been a Christian land for almost two hundred years.

There he was formally baptized.

In 981, together with his friend, the Saxon bishop Frederick, Thorvald set out on a missionary journey to his homeland, Iceland. He preached in his native region, in the north of the island. His preaching was successful: he baptized his relatives and friends. The small clan community of Skagafjord became Christian, and Thorvald was recognized as its bishop. He was recognized mainly because there was no one in Iceland at that time to ordain bishops. In effect, Thorvald was a self-proclaimed bishop. But this did not hinder either his faith or his work of Christianizing the island.

Having baptized his relatives and close companions, Thorvald attempted to baptize the neighboring communities. Here he met failure. Some flatly refused to believe in Christ, while some pagans even summoned him to court, accusing him of immoral behavior.

Court in Iceland took place at the thing—a kind of regional assembly, a gathering of adult landowners who decided all major regional matters. The judicial procedure was simple: trial by combat, a duel. Do not smile, dear reader, at that last phrase. Judicial duels were common in Rus’ as well, surviving there until the 16th century. In Iceland at that time, such duels were mandatory and continued until the death of one of the parties. Thorvald, defending his honor, unfortunately killed two accusers. After this double involuntary killing (socially approved by Varangian society of the time, but unacceptable from a Christian perspective), Thorvald left his native island—forever.

The Transformation of the Icelandic Bishop into Thorvald the Traveler, Preacher

A life as a wandering preacher of Christ awaited him. He traveled with sermons through half of Europe. He visited many regions of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, lands of the Slavs recently conquered by the Hungarians, Jerusalem captured by the Arabs, and the empire of the Romans—Byzantium.

There, in 985, the already famous preacher, who had earned a reputation as a new Chrysostom and by then was known as Thorvald the Traveler, was received by Emperor Basil II himself and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nicholas II Chrysoberges. The Byzantine rulers questioned Thorvald about his future travels and, learning that he planned a journey along the route “from the Varangians to the Greeks,” granted him authority to baptize pagans in those lands.

The Byzantine rulers likely did not place great hopes in Kodransson’s mission. They were actively preparing the ideological groundwork for the forthcoming baptism of Rus’ and believed that an additional well-known and experienced preacher in those lands would not hinder their plans, but rather help them.

How Thorvald the Traveler Became Saint Timothy of Polotsk

However, upon arriving in Kiev, Thorvald encountered a pagan reaction that then dominated the capital of Rus’. Prince Vladimir was not yet a saint and was still fervently defending the worship of Perun. Thorvald therefore departed to the north of the country, to Polotsk.

Vladimir was openly disliked there—indeed, hated. Polotsk, devastated by Vladimir’s troops, was a terrifying sight. Prince Rogvolod of Polotsk had been killed. Princess Rogneda had been dishonored. The townspeople had been robbed; many were killed, and many were in need of consolation.

Thorvald comforted the people as best he could. He spoke of Christ, of the fact that those killed by Vladimir’s forces would surely be in Paradise and would surely rise again on the Day of the Last Judgment. The people of Polotsk believed and were baptized. There Thorvald founded the Monastery of John the Baptist. This occurred a year or two before the “official” baptism of Rus’, in 986 or 987.

In that monastery Thorvald—who in Polotsk came to be called Saint Timothy of Polotsk—reposed around the year 1002 from the Nativity of Christ. The monastery he founded existed until the end of the 15th century.

The Cross of Saint Euphrosyne of Polotsk — Part of the Legacy of Thorvald the Traveler?

What remains today of the legacy of Timothy-Thorvald in Polotsk? Legends and faith. That is not little.

There is no material evidence of his presence in the Polotsk lands. However, there is clear evidence of a strong influence of Northern European, non-Byzantine Christianity on Polotsk. The main shrine of Polotsk—the Cross of Saint Eudokia (Euphrosyne) of Polotsk—appears, in our view, to combine three crosses: the Orthodox cross, the Celtic cross (with a solar circle in the center), and a stylized Icelandic cross (with a circle at the base).

The Icelandic cross was considered in Rus' to be a protector's cross for travelers, possibly precisely because it was brought to us by Thorvald the Traveler, Saint Timothy of Polotsk.

Belarus. The Beginning

How did the history of Belarus take shape in the time of Ancient Rus' and in the Middle Ages?
Jan 11, 2025

Watch this video on YouTube

Today we begin to discover the history of Belarus and its people. We will speak about Rogneda, about the mysterious sorcerer Vseslav, and about other remarkable figures of Belarusian antiquity.

“Slavs on the Dnieper,” Nicholas Roerich, 1905

Let us begin with the famous story of the fate of the unfortunate Rogneda. In the city of Polotsk there ruled Prince Rogvolod, who had a daughter, the beautiful Rogneda. The Kievan prince Yaropolk sought Rogneda's hand, and his proposal was gladly accepted. But Yaropolk had a

younger brother, Vladimir, who ruled Novgorod. He too was in love with Rogneda and also sent matchmakers to her.

Here we need to explain the situation. If we believe the chronicler, all this takes place at the end of the 10th century. Yaropolk, Vladimir, and their brother Oleg were the three sons of Prince Sviatoslav. After Sviatoslav was killed by the Pechenegs at the Dnieper rapids, his sons received different lands to rule. Yaropolk, as the eldest, became prince of Kiev; Vladimir ruled Novgorod. No one yet knew that he would become Vladimir the Great, Saint Vladimir; for now, he was simply his father's son. According to legend, Vladimir's mother was Malusha, the key-keeper of Sviatoslav's mother, Princess Olga. That is, Vladimir's lineage was not especially prestigious—his mother was a servant, albeit a high-ranking one.

Therefore, when Vladimir's matchmakers arrived, Rogneda proudly replied: "I do not want to unshoe the son of a slave." According to an ancient Slavic custom, the bride was to demonstrate submission to her future husband by ceremonially removing his footwear. Rogneda did not want to unshoe the son of a slave woman, a servant, since she considered this humiliating. After receiving this refusal, Vladimir gathered an army, marched on Polotsk, devastated the city, killed Rogneda's parents, and carried her off with him. After that, Vladimir defeated his brother Yaropolk and became prince of Kiev.

Rogneda bore Vladimir a son. If we believe the chronicles, Vladimir grew cold toward Rogneda, and she decided to kill him out of jealousy—but I think that if this legend has any real basis, it is more likely that Rogneda wanted to avenge her murdered parents and the destruction of Polotsk. In any case, the princess attempted to strike the sleeping Vladimir with a sword; he awoke, disarmed her, and wanted to execute her, but took pity on their son and sent Rogneda, together with the boy, into exile in the land of Polotsk.

"Vladimir and Rogneda," Sergey Gribkov, 1884

We see that the princess, the daughter of the ruler of Polotsk, was so confident in herself and in her position that she rejected Prince Vladimir as insufficiently noble. The prince of Kiev was suitable for her, but the younger brother, whose origin was unclear—was not. This tells us much about the importance of Polotsk. The princes of Polotsk stood apart, yet these lands, like Smolensk, Chernigov, and others, were bound to Kievan Rus' by dense and varied relationships—sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. Perhaps Rogneda truly was a great beauty, but it is obvious that this was not the only factor—marrying into the Polotsk princely house was advantageous.

It should be said at once that I will not delve into scholarly debates (I emphasize: scholarly, not political) about whether the inhabitants of ancient Rus' were one people. Too often this is used as the basis for a false conclusion that if they were united then, today Ukrainians, Belarusians,

and Russians must be one people as well. First, what existed more than a thousand years ago does not determine today's relationships. Second, the question itself is posed incorrectly. When we use the words "Ukrainian," "Belarusian," and "Russian" in reference to the 10th–11th centuries, this is an anachronism and a violation of scholarly method. Such concepts simply did not exist then. We can speak of the ancestors of Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians; but the people of Vladimir's and Rogneda's time perceived themselves as inhabitants of the land of Kiev, Smolensk, or Polotsk. Their self-identification was different, and attributing our modern notions to them is entirely meaningless. We have already spoken about this in the lecture course on the history of Ukraine, when discussing Kievan Rus'.

The Mixing of Tribes

Historians long tried to prove that Rogvolod and Rogneda were Slavic names, but most linguists agree that their origin is different—possibly Baltic or Scandinavian. Various tribes lived in these regions, and here we see an extremely interesting complex of relationships among different ethnic groups. Two important rivers pass through the territory of modern Belarus—the Western Dvina and the Dnieper—and these were ancient routes, first for those moving south from the glacier, and later for merchants and traders. Thus the Scandinavian element appeared here, when the Varangians, tribes from the Baltic region, arrived. Archaeologists see a strong Baltic component in these lands, especially in ancient burials. Nearby were territories inhabited by Finno-Ugric tribes, as well as the lands of modern Poland, where Slavic tribes lived—so the mixing of cultures was constant.

"Overseas Guests," Nicholas Roerich, 1901

The chronicles say that on the territory of what is now Belarus lived the Dregoviches, Radimiches, and Kriviches. The generally accepted view among historians is that Slavic tribes came here around the 8th–9th centuries, when the Slavs were settling the East European plain. According to the chronicles, they came from Poland, where there were two brothers, Radim and Vyatko; from one descended the Radimiches, from the other the Vyatiches. Such explanations, of course, provoke smiles among historians. This is folk etymology, a legend most likely invented after the fact—especially since the chronicles date to the 12th century and describe events from 300–400 years earlier.

The chronicler goes on to say that Oleg the Wise, moving along the Dnieper from Novgorod to Kiev, gradually subjugated various tribes. Thus the Radimiches began paying tribute and came under the control of the Kievan princes. Large territories around present-day Gomel, Brest, Minsk, and Grodno were occupied by the Dregoviches—their name derives from a Balto-Slavic

word meaning “swamp.” The Kriviches lived both in what is now Russia, around Smolensk and elsewhere, and in Belarus. There were no longer isolated tribes, but powerful tribal unions: people spoke similar languages, understood one another well, yet still perceived themselves as distinct—Radimiches from Dregoviches, Dregoviches from Kriviches.

The Icelandic Trace

Gradually life changed; agriculture, trade, and cultural connections developed. The prosperity of these lands was influenced by the famous route “from the Varangians to the Greeks.” It is no accident that at the end of the 10th century Yaropolk and Vladimir sought Rogneda’s hand—Polotsk land had become the strongest and richest in the region, a center around which important events unfolded.

The chronicler first mentions the Polotsk land in 862, describing events after the arrival of the Varangians. Polotsk was one of the cities that Rurik gave to someone from his retinue to rule, which supports the idea of the Scandinavian origin of the local rulers. On the unstable ground of legends and traditions, Polotsk suddenly turns out to be connected with a hero of Icelandic sagas—Thorvald Kodransson.

Thorvald Kodransson (c. 950 – c. 1002) — Preacher

Thorvald heard Christian preaching in Ireland, was baptized, and became a preacher. However, when Icelandic pagans began to argue with him, he resorted to fighting and killed two people. Thorvald had to leave Iceland and went to Constantinople. The Byzantine emperor, according to the saga, gave Thorvald something like letters of credential and sent him to the Slavic lands as his representative. Thus Thorvald found himself in Polotsk. There is a supposition that the local saint Timothy (Tur) of Polotsk is in fact Thorvald himself, who founded a monastery in these lands and died and was buried there. This once again shows what incredible contacts could occur in those times.

The Line of the Iziaslaviches

If Thorvald really was in Polotsk, this happened during the time of Rogneda and her son Iziaslav, whom Vladimir had exiled after the failed assassination attempt. While the boy was young, they lived in the new city of Iziaslavl, named after him, and Rogneda ruled on his behalf.

Later, the grown Iziaslav moved to Polotsk, rebuilt it, and founded an independent dynasty of Polotsk princes—the line of the Iziaslaviches.

Iziaslav Vladimirovich (? – 1001) — Prince of Polotsk

In Ancient Rus' there existed a ladder system of succession. All Rus' lands were considered the possession of the Rurikid clan, and princes moved from one city to another according to a complex principle in which inheritance passed not from father to son, but from brother to brother. The eldest in the clan ruled in Kiev, while the others moved among other important cities according to a complicated system. What is important for us to understand is that the Polotsk princes were not included in this system, despite being related to the princes of Kiev, Smolensk, and Chernigov. Perhaps the legend of Vladimir exiling Rogneda and her son and renouncing them reflects the real separateness of the Polotsk lands.

The Polotsk princes sought to expand their possessions and gradually did so. On the one hand, they moved toward the Baltic Sea, to lands inhabited by various Baltic and Finno-Ugric peoples—Livs, Lithuanians, Latgalians, Ests, and many others. These peoples had not yet achieved statehood; tribute could be collected from them, and fur, amber, and other valuables could be traded very successfully, with the help of Varangians or independently. On the other hand, they attempted to advance into Rus' lands.

Relations with Novgorod were always complex. On the one hand, Novgorod was a military and trading power with which it made sense to form an alliance. On the other hand, it was, of course, a competitor.

We know that Bryachislav, son of Iziaslav, attacked Novgorod in 1021 and seized considerable booty. Yaroslav the Wise caught up with him, defeated him in battle, and then they made peace. Bryachislav recognized Yaroslav's seniority and in return received Vitebsk and other territories. However, in 1044 Bryachislav died, and one of the most romantic and interesting figures of Belarusian history ascended the throne—Prince Vseslav of Polotsk, a hero of fairy tales, legends, and epic songs. It is difficult to see the real person behind all these layers, but let us see what we know about him.

The Sorcerer Prince

The chronicler says that when Vseslav was born, volkhvy—pagan priests—were present, despite the fact that Rogneda had accepted Christianity, Vseslav's grandfather Iziaslav was religious, and his father Bryachislav was raised in the Christian faith. Yet the child was born in

the presence of pagan priests; moreover, the infant was found to have a “yazveno.” It is not entirely clear what this was. The most realistic assumption is remnants of the placenta or amniotic sac. The volkhvy told Vseslav’s mother that he must always carry this “yazveno” on himself. Legend says that Vseslav himself was skilled in sorcery, that he was a magician and a shapeshifter.

Vseslav Bryachislavich (c. 1030 – 1101) — Prince of Polotsk, Grand Prince of Kiev 1068–1069

In The Tale of Igor’s Campaign, although it was written a century later, a rather large passage is devoted to Vseslav. Here is a quotation in the translation by Academician Likhachev:

> “Vseslav, by trickery, leaned upon his horses and leapt toward the city of Kiev and touched the golden throne of Kiev with the shaft of his spear. He sprang away from them like a fierce beast at midnight from Belgorod, wrapped in blue mist, gained his fortune: in three attempts he opened the gates of Novgorod, shattered Yaroslav’s glory, leapt like a wolf to the Nemiga from Dudutki.

...

Prince Vseslav judged men, apportioned cities to princes, yet himself at night prowled like a wolf: from Kiev before the cockcrow he roamed to Tmutarakan.

...

For him they rang the bells early for matins at holy Sophia in Polotsk, and he heard that ringing in Kiev.”

Behind Vseslav there is clearly some pagan line. This is not surprising: the farther from Kiev, the longer paganism persisted—it survived into the 19th century, and in the 11th century, of course, it was widespread.

Vseslav fiercely fought his relatives. After the death of Yaroslav the Wise in 1054, his sons divided all the major possessions among themselves and constantly fought Vseslav.

The eldest son of Yaroslav the Wise, Prince Iziaslav, made peace with Vseslav in 1067, then treacherously threw him and his two sons into a porub, an underground prison. A year later the Yaroslaviches suffered defeat in battle against the Polovtsians; the people of Kiev expelled them, freed Vseslav from the porub, and proclaimed him their prince. However, he held power for only seven months: Iziaslav obtained the support of the Polish king Bolesław, came with a large army, and expelled Vseslav from Kiev and Polotsk. Vseslav fled to the Vods, a Finno-Ugric tribe, where he also gathered an army and drove Iziaslav’s son out of Polotsk. What followed were about thirty years of turbulent clashes, yet under Vseslav the Principality of Polotsk reached a very high level of development.

Holy Sophia

Vseslav built the Church of Saint Sophia in Polotsk. The point was not that the sorcerer respected the Christian religion, but that he had the resources (building a stone cathedral required enormous funds) and wanted to show that Polotsk was equal to Kiev and Novgorod. That is why the church was dedicated to Saint Sophia.

Model reconstruction of Saint Sophia Cathedral, Polotsk, 11th century

When Saint Sophia was built in Kiev under Yaroslav the Wise, it was a demonstration that Kiev was the heir of Constantinople (or at least no worse than Constantinople). When Saint Sophia of Novgorod appeared, Novgorod clearly wanted to show that it was equal to Kiev. Vseslav had the same motives.

Toward the Baltic Sea

After Vseslav's death, Polotsk's history was no longer so smooth. The 12th century was a time of fragmentation and brutal internecine wars for all the lands of Ancient Rus'. Although princes still recognized their kinship, the struggle for resources and trade routes came to the fore. Vseslav's descendants fought among themselves just as the descendants of Vladimir Monomakh and other princes did.

Expansion toward the Baltic Sea went much better. Throughout the 11th and 12th centuries local peoples paid tribute to Polotsk—without much enthusiasm, but relations were built more or less normally. On the territory of today's Latvia several principalities arose, primarily Koknese and Jersika, whose rulers recognized the prince of Polotsk as their "elder brother"—they sent him tribute and received his help. However, new players appeared on the field.

The Crusader Invasion

At the end of the 12th century, far away in the Holy Land, the Crusaders suffered defeat: Muslim armies gradually drove them out of the conquered territories. On the map of Europe there were two places to which the Crusaders went with great enthusiasm: the Iberian Peninsula, whose south was occupied by the Moors, and northern Europe—the Baltic Sea coast—where numerous pagans still lived and needed to be converted to Christianity. Thus missionaries began to arrive here, primarily knights of the Teutonic Order, whose center was in Prussia.

At the end of the 12th century Bishop Meinhard asked the prince of Polotsk, Vladimir, for permission to preach among the Livs—who were evidently considered his subjects—and founded the Bishopric of Ikšķile on the territory of modern Latvia.

Meinhard (? – 1196) — Catholic missionary, first Bishop of Livonia

Everywhere in these lands the Crusaders followed the same scheme as in the Holy Land: having settled somewhere, built a church, and begun missionary work, they erected castles—fortifications where a military detachment could be stationed. And this sharply changed the balance of power.

At some point the Livs realized with interest that they had not only been baptized but also had to pay tribute to Bishop Meinhard. They began to renounce baptism. The more hardline Bishop Berthold, who replaced Meinhard, was killed during clashes with the Livs, and the Teutonic Order sent a detachment of Crusaders to the bishopric. To suppress uprisings and establish his power, the new bishop Albert founded an entire city—Riga—and created the Order of the Swordbearers, a military force supporting his regime. Later the Swordbearers became the Livonian Order. In the 13th century the struggle for control over the Livs and Latgalians, for the tribute collected from them, and for access to the mouth of the Dvina was waged mainly between the princes of Polotsk and the Order.

The Time of Mindaugas

At the same time another power emerged—Lithuania. At the beginning of the 12th century it was mainly the Polotsk princes who campaigned into Lithuanian lands. But by the beginning of the 13th century the situation reversed: Lithuanian princes campaigned into Polotsk lands. In the first half of the 13th century a very important figure in Lithuanian history rose—Prince Mindaugas, who gradually took control of the lands inhabited by Lithuanian tribes.

Mindaugas (? – 1263) — First ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

Mindaugas sent his nephew Tautvilas and several other princes to wage war in the Smolensk land, promising them lands after the conquest of Smolensk. The campaign failed, and when the princes returned, it turned out that Mindaugas had quietly seized their possessions. They fled to the Galician land to a relative, Grand Prince Daniel Romanovich of Galicia, and took refuge with him. With Daniel Romanovich's help, Tautvilas even became prince in Polotsk several times. He found himself squeezed between two powerful rulers—his uncle Mindaugas and Daniel Romanovich. In the end Tautvilas chose his uncle and even campaigned against his former benefactor Daniel Romanovich.

Mindaugas ruled quite successfully and was even crowned, and his wife Martha became queen. However, after Martha's death in 1262, Mindaugas came up with nothing better than marrying her sister, who, as the chronicler writes, was in every way like the deceased queen. One problem: the new wife was already married. Her husband, Prince Daumantas, who ruled part of the Lithuanian lands, went to war against Mindaugas, and Mindaugas was killed. Lithuania returned to paganism, because baptism at that time was an exclusively political matter.

Andrei Olgerdovich

The second half of the 13th century was a dark time for Polotsk, about which we know very little. These lands changed hands; different princes ruled there. In 1310 the Polotsk prince, who had no children, bequeathed his lands to the Archbishop of Riga—that is, to the Order—but they were bought out by the Lithuanian prince Vytenis. He did not annex the new lands to his own but preserved the independence of Polotsk and placed various Lithuanian princes on its throne. In the mid-14th century Lithuania was ruled by the powerful Prince Algirdas, one of the greatest Lithuanian rulers. Algirdas was a pagan, and he had a son by one of his wives named Andrei—mentioned in Russian chronicles as Andrei Olgerdovich. Andrei ruled Polotsk from 1342 and fought many wars alongside his father. In 1377 Algirdas died. Power was seized by Jogaila, the younger brother of Algirdas's more beloved wife, and Andrei Olgerdovich entered the service of the Moscow prince Dmitry Ivanovich, the future Dmitry Donskoy.

Jogaila (? – 1434) — Grand Duke of Lithuania, King of Poland

Soon after the Battle of Kulikovo, Jogaila installed his brother Skirgaila in Polotsk, but the people of Polotsk did not want such a prince and expelled him. In Polotsk land the veche tradition was very strong, and princes had to reckon with the townspeople.

In 1385 Jogaila married the Polish queen Jadwiga. The Union of Krewo was concluded, and Lithuania accepted Catholicism. Andrei opposed the union (perhaps for him it was more important to oppose his brother), but he was defeated together with his allies and taken prisoner. Jogaila became king of Poland, and Lithuania began to be ruled by his cousin Vytautas, who expelled Skirgaila, after which Andrei returned to Polotsk. He began to rule very

young—around the age of twenty—and, with interruptions, governed Polotsk for about half a century: he returned, fled, fought, was on the Kulikovo Field, sat in captivity. In 1399 the venerable elder Andrei died in battle with the Horde on the Vorskla River. An incredible life. After Andrei Olgerdovich, the fate of Polotsk and other lands that today are part of Belarus changed fundamentally. Vytautas did not want to preserve vassals, and these lands became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Thus began a completely new stage, which we will speak about another time.

I'm interested in your opinion: what factors in these centuries primarily determined the development of Belarus? The personalities of princes? Geographic position? Rivers? Relations with neighbors? Or something else? I await your comments. Farewell.

My lecture tour

- Denver — March 5, tickets ↗
- Palo Alto — March 7

A Mystery of Russian History: How a Viking from Iceland Baptized Rus'

Moscow, February 21 — RIA Novosti, Anton Skripunov.

Harsh warriors, killers, and robbers — this is how Vikings are usually imagined. However, in recent years scholars have been finding more and more evidence that some of them were prominent Christian missionaries. And one Icelandic monk, according to researchers, founded the first Russian monastery. How Vikings helped baptize Rus' — in this RIA Novosti report.

A Stranger Among His Own

The commonly accepted version that Christianity in Rus' had purely Greek origins is challenged by archaeological data: researchers are finding Scandinavian and German religious artifacts — especially in the north-western part of historical Rus', in Belarus as well as in Russia's Pskov, Smolensk, Leningrad, and Novgorod regions.

It was precisely in these lands that a monk from... Iceland preached. His name was Thorvald Kodransson (that is, the son of Kodran). His nickname was the Traveler.

He was called that for a reason: around the year 970, at the age of twenty, the Icelander set off to wander across Europe — whether for trade or for raids, since these were among the main sources of income for Vikings.

> “After Thorvald visited many lands, he accepted the righteous faith (and, according to tradition, became a monk). He was baptized by a bishop from Saxland (Northern Germany),

whose name was Frederick. Thorvald asked Bishop Frederick to go with him to Iceland and preach there the Word of God, in order to convert his father, mother, and other close relatives. The bishop readily agreed,”
— recounts the ancient Scandinavian Saga of the Baptism.

This took place in the 970s. According to historians, Thorvald and Frederick were the first missionaries in Iceland. However, their preaching was not successful — their compatriots did not wish to abandon the ancestral faith in Odin.

Nor were their customs gentle: the priests were constantly subjected to intrigues. Once Bishop Frederick was publicly ridiculed before the entire community — skalds (poets) composed a mocking song about him. The Viking code required Thorvald to defend his teacher’s honor by means of holmgang — a duel with swords.

The Icelandic monk won — he cut down two offenders at once. For this, his own relatives cursed him. This meant that no one in Iceland was allowed to approach him. Local laws even forbade leaving food for such people.

The missionaries had no choice but to leave the island. Frederick’s path led to Norway, where he was received more warmly. There he built a church and created one of the first Christian communities. Thorvald’s fate, however, turned out to be far more unusual.

In the “Land of Cities”

The Icelandic monk traveled by sea to the Holy Land — apparently to atone for the sin of killing. Contrary to popular belief, even after the Muslim conquest Palestine, despite all dangers, attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrims.

From there Thorvald decided to return to Scandinavia — to Norway, to Bishop Frederick — by what was then the safest route: through Constantinople and the Rus’ lands. In the Byzantine capital, the sagas say, he was even received by the emperor.

> “The emperor himself of Miklagard (the Scandinavian name for Constantinople) and all his chieftains revered Thorvald as a splendid preacher and herald of our Lord Jesus Christ, and no less so did all the bishops and abbots throughout Grikland (the territory of Byzantium) and Syrland (Syria),”
— states The Tale of Thorvald the Traveler.

And apparently, the emperor persuaded the monk to preach in the Rus' lands. Scandinavian tradition says that the ruler appointed him "patriarch and lord over all the kings in Gardar." Gardar, or Gardariki, is the ancient Scandinavian name for Kievan Rus', meaning "the land of cities."

From this point, the sagas diverge in their accounts. Scholars debate where exactly and in which years the Icelander first preached.

According to some historians, Thorvald arrived in Kiev via the Dnieper around the year 983. At that time Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich was carrying out a religious reform: from the many pagan Slavic gods, he selected several and compelled his subjects to worship them.

In the "capital city," the Icelander became acquainted with the future king of Norway, Olaf Tryggvason. Olaf's parents had fled to Vladimir, who was apparently their distant relative.

According to several sources, Thorvald persuaded the future Norwegian ruler to convert to Christianity. Olaf then went to be baptized — not in Rome, as was customary in Western Europe at the time, but in Constantinople.

> "There is a hypothesis that Norway during the reign from Olaf Tryggvason (from 995) to Harald Hardrada was oriented, in confessional and ideological terms, toward the Eastern Christian world — Rus' and Byzantium,"
— notes historian Maria Samonova in her research.

And it was precisely Olaf, some scholars believe, who persuaded Vladimir to accept Eastern-rite Christianity. This is indirectly suggested by a passage in The Primary Chronicle about a certain Varangian who "saw paradise and hell in a dream," after which he urged the people of Kiev to abandon paganism. Possibly Rus' was baptized thanks to him and the Icelandic monk.

Polotsk Instead of Kiev

However, not all researchers consider this account plausible. The hypothesis is contradicted by Anglo-Saxon chronicles, according to which in the latter half of the 980s Olaf went to Britain, where his countrymen attempted to conquer local kingdoms. There, on the Isles of Scilly — the southernmost point of present-day England — he was mortally wounded. One of the priests persuaded him to accept Christianity.

Olaf did so, “and seven days later the wound miraculously healed.” Afterward he carried out several raids on East Anglia and Ireland, then departed for Norway, where after a long struggle he seized the throne. Around 996 the kingdom officially became Christian. Two years later, the ruler completed the work begun earlier by Thorvald Kodransson — he Christianized Iceland.

So what was the monk himself doing? Most likely, he was not in Kiev, despite reports that the Byzantine emperor had sent him to preach in Rus'. According to the Saga of the Baptism, around the year 986 the Icelander arrived in Polotsk.

> “One must look carefully at the realities of that time. At the end of the 10th century the Polotsk land did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Kiev Church; for example, this is why Russian chronicles do not mention the construction of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Polotsk,” — explains Belarusian historian Mikhail Bavtovich.

Perhaps the Byzantine ruler was not interested in the Polotsk lands, unlike Kiev, and therefore sent a foreigner there instead of bishops. Or perhaps he did not wish to compete for territory with the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I, who as early as the 960s, supposedly at the request of Princess Olga, had sent Archbishop Adalbert of Magdeburg to the western Rus' lands — a mission that ultimately failed.

Thorvald was more fortunate. Above all because Polotsk was ruled by Norwegians: in the 960s it was seized by Jarl Rognvald, known in Russian chronicles as Rogvolod. In 980 the principality was conquered by Prince Vladimir, who took Rogvolod's daughter Rogneda as his wife.

> “Information from chronicles and sagas allows us to suppose that the missionary activity of Thorvald Kodransson was carried out with the support of representatives of the Polotsk princely dynasty — Rogneda and her son Iziaslav,” — writes historian Maria Samonova.

The “Lost” Monastery

The Icelandic monk built a monastery in Polotsk in honor of John the Forerunner and Baptizer of the Lord around the year 988. This would make it the first monastery on the territory of Rus'. According to the conventional view, that title belongs to the Boris and Gleb Monastery in Torzhok, built in 1038 in honor of Boris and Gleb — the sons of Vladimir killed in internecine conflict.

It is believed that Thorvald died in Polotsk in 1002. Grateful Polotsk residents canonized him several years later. According to surviving testimony from a German named Brand, in 1040 Thorvald was the most venerated saint in the city, and the monastery he founded was among the largest in Eastern Europe.

However, modern historians can neither confirm nor refute these data. Mentions of the monastery in chronicles are quite rare; the last dates to the mid-14th century.

The monastery and the Church of John the Forerunner were located on an island in the middle of the Western Dvina, opposite the mouth of the Polota River. Possibly Thorvald himself was buried there.

> “Another fact that supports the idea that Thorvald found his rest there, as stated in the saga — í fjalli einu (‘on a certain mountain’), í háfjalle (‘on a high mountain’) — is the presence in Polotsk topography of a sacred center called Black (Castle) Hill: an elevation at the confluence of the Western Dvina and the Polota. It indeed had steep, high slopes. In the 11th century Saint Sophia Cathedral was built on Black Hill, and in the 14th century the Upper Castle was located there,”

— Samonova notes.

According to another version, the monk’s grave is on the outskirts of modern Polotsk, in the area of the Ekimany Cemetery. However, historians still have to verify all these hypotheses. No large-scale archaeological excavations have yet been conducted.

Despite this, more and more researchers are coming to believe that Rus’ accepted baptism not only thanks to the Greeks. Scandinavians made a major contribution as well, since, as Samonova emphasizes, they “were closely connected with princely authority and the military-trading elite.” And the Icelandic monk Thorvald Kodransson played an especially important role in this process.

“A Saint for All” — Belarusians Recall That Christianity Was Brought to Us by an Icelander

July 18, 2016, 08:59

Anton Trafimovich

In the year 986, the Icelandic missionary Thorvald the Traveler founded a Christian church in Polotsk. Only two years later, the Kievan prince Vladimir the Great baptized Rus’. Although Thorvald is not officially recognized by any confession as the first baptizer, in recent years his

cult has been spreading in the Vitebsk region. And this year we could have marked the 1030th anniversary of the baptism of the Belarusian lands.

How Thorvald the Traveler is honored in churches, temples, and even pubs was investigated by Svaboda.

Rasony: "There Should Be No Obstacles to Canonization"

In short, Thorvald's story goes like this. The Icelander Thorvald Kodransson was a warrior and served the king of Denmark. In Ireland, he encountered Christianity and abandoned warfare. He went to Saxony, where he was baptized by Bishop Frederick. Together with him, he attempted to Christianize Iceland.

Local pagans, however, expelled the preachers, and Thorvald and Frederick set off for Constantinople. Emperor Basil II himself sent the Icelander to the "Rus' princes." In 986, Thorvald arrived in Polotsk and built the Church of Saint John the Forerunner there. After 1002, he died. He was buried near the church. Local people regarded him as a saint.

The story of Thorvald is known from three Scandinavian sagas: the Saga of the Baptism, the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason, and the Book of the Flat Island (Flateyjarbók).

In Belarus, the Icelandic missionary began to be mentioned especially often in the late 1980s. Father Vyacheslav Barok, parish priest of the Churches of Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych in Rasony and Saint Anthony of Padua in Vitebsk, learned about Thorvald back in school history classes. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when he was studying in the upper grades, history in the town of Miory was taught by Vitold Yermalenok.

> "That was a time when, in Belarusian history lessons, we could read Lastouski and Ihnatouski," Father Vyacheslav told Svaboda. "Even then we were told about the ambiguity of our history. And it was mentioned that Christianity came to Belarus not only from the East, but also from the West."

Later, the historian Yanka Tratsiak told students at the Grodno Higher Theological Seminary—where Barok studied—about Thorvald the Traveler.

From the year 2000, Father Vyacheslav Barok was building a church in Rasony, 50 kilometers north of Polotsk. Together with the artist Uladzimir Kandrusievich, who decorated the new church, they decided to dedicate one of the frescoes to the arrival of Thorvald the Traveler in Polotsk and the baptism of the Polotsk people.

> “Rasony itself is not directly connected with Thorvald,” says Barok. “But this is historic Polotsk land.”

Thorvald the Traveler is not recognized as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, there are no icons or prayers for his intercession. But Father Vyacheslav believes the status of the Icelandic missionary could still change.

> “The question of canonizing Thorvald the Traveler has not yet been raised,” says the priest. “But I think it is possible. If the Orthodox Church canonized Vladimir, why not canonize Thorvald the Traveler? There should be no obstacles.”

Polotsk: “He Is the Baptizer of Polotsk Land and the Belarusian Lands”

In Polotsk, where Thorvald lived and died, his role in the baptism of the Belarusian lands is considered unquestionable.

> “He is perceived as the baptizer of Polotsk land and our lands,” said Father Alexander Shavtsov, rector of the Greek Catholic Church in Polotsk.

According to the priest, a previous rector even commissioned an icon of Thorvald the Traveler. It does not yet exist, but this is only a matter of time, Shavtsov believes.

Thorvald arrived in Polotsk before the division of the Christian Church into Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Greek Catholics especially emphasize this fact. They argue that the Church in Belarus was unified not only after the Union of Brest, but from the very beginning.

> “This shows that the Uniates are not accidental in Belarus. The Union of Brest was not accidental,” says Shavtsov.

To commemorate this important figure for Polotsk, local residents wanted to erect a cross at the site of the former church and grave of Thorvald the Traveler. However, Ales Arkush, a Polotsk writer, believes it is too early to install such a cross, because the Orthodox might oppose it.

> “Although Saint Euphrosyne of Polotsk herself was from the Rogvolodovich lineage, and Rogvolod was a Varangian,” Arkush says. “For them this is a blasphemous topic, because it contradicts the Russian doctrine about where the Church originated.”

In Arkush’s view, recognizing Thorvald the Traveler would add truth about the origins of Polotsk—about who created this polity and built the first churches here.

> “There is no need to fear this. Little by little we must move out of the Moscow discourse. Thorvald is our history. He is our saint, and we must honor him—both Orthodox and Catholics.”

There Is Only One Place Where Thorvald Could Have Been Buried

The most important thing connected with Thorvald in Polotsk is the place where he lived. The sagas say that Thorvald settled on an island in Polotsk, founded the Church of Saint John the Forerunner there, and was buried near that same church.

> “If he died in Polotsk land, he had to be buried near the church,” Arkush is convinced. “This is a general Christian tradition. Priests were buried near the churches where they served.”

The sagas say that Thorvald was buried on an island. Interestingly, a hill near Saint Sophia Cathedral in Polotsk is also called the Island.

From Polotsk charters it is known that in the 14th century there was indeed a church on this Island, also dedicated to Saint John the Forerunner.

No thorough archaeological excavations have yet been conducted there to confirm this theory—only surface test pits.

> “There is only one hill on the Island where the church could theoretically have stood,” says Arkush. “And Thorvald should be buried there as well.”

According to the writer, the Island was repeatedly flooded, and only one elevated part always remained untouched.

> “There was no other place to build a church,” he says.

One saga, however, places Thorvald’s burial on a “high mountain in Drofne.” Some researchers associate this name with the Drut or Druya rivers.

> “But it is hard to imagine that he would have built a Christian church deep within pagan territory,” Arkush says.

Vitebsk: “Thorvald Is the Heavenly Patron of Our Pub”

An unexpected embodiment of Thorvald the Traveler appeared this year in Vitebsk. A new Irish pub in the historic center was named “Thorvald.”

As Svaboda discovered, the pub was named precisely in honor of the baptizer of Polotsk.

> “We were looking for something that would connect Ireland and Belarus,” said Vital Brovka, the owner of the pub. “And the idea of Thorvald came up.”

Thorvald indeed has a connection to Ireland: it was there that the Icelandic Viking first encountered Christianity. From there he went to Saxony, where he was baptized.

> “He brought light from Ireland to Belarus,” Brovka says. “He is the heavenly patron of our pub.”

The idea of choosing Thorvald as patron was suggested to Brovka by his friend Raman Varanou, a historian by training.

> “When you study the history of Belarus, you come across this name,” says Varanou. “I knew about him since school, when I was preparing to enter university and studying history in depth.”

In the Vitebsk pub, regular patrons know who Thorvald the Traveler is. Soon, a “modern fresco” depicting Thorvald will appear on two buildings near the pub.

Thorvald Should Be a Saint for Catholics, Orthodox, and Uniates Alike

For now, the veneration of Thorvald the Traveler remains a private initiative. No one officially marked the 1030th anniversary of the baptism of Polotsk this year.

At the same time, both the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus include the figure of Thorvald the Traveler in the history of the Christianization of our lands.

The official website of the Belarusian Orthodox Church states:

> “According to the Saga of the Baptism, around the year 1000 Polotsk was visited by the Varangian missionary Thorvald Kodransson, a native of Iceland, who had previously been to Jerusalem and who founded near Polotsk the Monastery of Saint John the Forerunner.”

The same story appears on the official website of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus:

> “There even exists an opinion among historians that Polotsk was baptized in 986 by the Norman Thorvald nicknamed the Traveler (that is, even before the official baptism of Rus’ according to the Eastern rite by Prince Vladimir in 988).”

Perhaps Another Saint Will Appear in Polotsk

It is precisely through Thorvald the Traveler that the Church and the Catholic Church in Belarus could find common ground, believes Ales Arkush.

> “Thorvald is a suitable figure for the ecumenical movement, for the unity of Christians. Just as Euphrosyne of Polotsk is recognized by Orthodox, Catholics, and Greek Catholics alike, so Thorvald should be a saint for all.”

Thorvald Kodransson: the first Belarusian saints

The Dane Rurik and the Icelander Thorvald—these names of brave Vikings are absent from the history of Belarus. And yet the first founded Christian Polotsk, and the second is the first Belarusian saint of Polotsk. Why did they disappear from the context of Belarusian history? Clearly, imperially minded Russian historiography preferred to see only Slavs among its heroes.