GEORGE P. MAJESKA (College Park, MD, USA)

Patriarch Photius and the Conversion of the Rus

In the year 860, the Rus' attacked the city of Constantinople, burned and pillaged the suburbs, and, to judge from the vivid sermon of Patriarch Photius, sparked an immediate religious revival.¹ A standard Byzantine response to "barbarian" threats and attacks such as this was an attempt to a) convert the troublesome nation to Christianity and thus (hopefully) defuse its warlike behavior or, failing that, b) ally with a neighbor of the threatening power.²

This policy was probably the plan in the minds of the Byzantine decision makers when, shortly after the unexpected attack, they dispatched Professor Constantine the Philosopher (better known as St. Cyril, the Apostle of the Slavs) to Crimea and to the capital of the Khazar Kaganate, the power that dominated the steppe north of the Black and Caspian Seas.³ Why to Khazaria rather than to Kiev on the Dnieper where the attack is normally assumed to have originated? And why Constantine? As far as we know he did not know Turkic, or Hebrew, the lingua franca of the Khazars; he did, however, know Slavic,⁴ assumedly the working language of the Rus'. Thus it was probably first to Rus' that he was sent to preach. The "mission to the Khazars" would have been "option b": ally with your enemy's neighbor (if "option a," convert the enemy, failed). Thus, while wintering in Crimea and studying Hebrew to use on his diplomatic assignment to Khazaria, it should not surprise us that Slavic-speaking Constantine showed great interest in a book written in "Rus'...

*(An earlier version of this article was read at the Twenty-sixth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference, meeting at Harvard University. The author is much indebted to Professors Edward Keenan and Ihor Ševčenko, who offered useful comments on the paper at that meeting.)*


⁴. Ibid., 386.
letters" (whatever they were), and in a man who could read them. In the spring he continued his journey to Khazaria, where he seems not to have made many converts, although he probably did sign an alliance with the Khazars (assumedly against the Rus', whose attack on "the city guarded by God" seems to have occasioned his mission to the north).

But perhaps Constantine actually was successful in preaching to the Rus' while he wintered in Crimea, for in 867 Patriarch Photius announced in an encyclical letter to his fellow patriarchs that the "Godless Rus'" who had wrought such havoc on the Bosporus just a few years previously had accepted a bishop! But the "Christianization of Rus'," i.e., Kievan Rus', comes only around 988-990, a good hundred twenty years in the future. Who are these Rus' who had accepted a bishop? My suggestion is that they were a group of "non-Kievan Rus'," i.e., a significant group of Slavs under the domination of Vikings, who had settlements in the Volga and Don valleys and had been working the Volga and Don trade routes for hundreds of years in the same way the Kievan Rus' had recently started working the Dnieper trade route. These "Eastern Rus'" are well attested in the standard Arab and Persian geographical literature, and, indeed, a fragmentary Arabic work from the last half of the ninth century speaks of Rus' "who identify themselves as Christians." The Eastern Rus' were traders using the Volga and Don waterways at the sufferance of the Khazars, who controlled the western steppe in this period. These "Eastern Rus'" must have been those who sent the ambassadors of the "Chacanus of the Rus'" (i.e., kagan, the Khazar name for a ruler), identified as Swedes when they passed through Ingelheim in 839.

5. Ibid., 359.
6. Ibid., 370.
7. "Encyclical to the Eastern Patriarchs (Spring, 867)," in V. Grumel, Les regestes des actes du patriarchat de Constantinople (Paris: Institut français d'études Byzantines, 1972), No. 497/481, p. 120.
8. H. Ahrweiler, "Les relations entre les byzantins et les russes au ixème siècle," Bulletin de l'Association Internationale des Études Byzantines, 5 (1971): 44-70; reprinted, ibid., Byzance: les pays et les territoires (London: Variorum Reprints, 1976), argues that the Rus' who attacked Constantinople in 860 and accepted a bishop soon thereafter were a small group of Viking brigands in eastern Crimea who were tributary to the Khazars. They were later integrated into the Byzantine population of Crimea and lost their separate identity. Ahrweiler's hypothesis, however, includes no explanation of the Slavic language component in the mission of Constantine.