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A BRIEF SURVEY OF VIEWS ON CHRISTIANIZATION IN KARELIA

Christianity was introduced to Finland almost simultaneously — in the twelfth century — from two directions: East and West. While the majority of Finns received the Christian faith in its Western form from Swedish missionaries, the easternmost province of Finland, Karelia, as a result of its close contact with Russia, was gradually converted into Orthodoxy...

The geographical position of Karelia between East and West determined the course of history and the destiny of Orthodoxy. Karelia became a battleground between two powerful neighbors, Novgorod and Sweden, over religion and politics. While remaining faithful to Russian ecclesiastical authorities, the Karelians were politically oriented towards the West: they wanted to preserve political unity with the Finnish people.1

Thus begins Father Veikko Purmonen’s essay on the history of Orthodoxy in Finland. He voices the popularized view that Karelia has been a focal point of conflict since the early Middle Ages in the North. Since Stalin occupied the province in 1944, less than half of the region known as Karelia belongs to Finland. At various times in history, the Finnish-Russian border has shifted substantially, and yet the Karelians have been a recognized cultural and ethnic group since the twelfth century. This essay is an effort to assess the various approaches and sources of evidence used to understand the complicated and unique Christianization process that took place in Karelia. Conversion in Karelia will be viewed from traditional, historical, anthropological and archaeological points of view.

By the eleventh century, Sweden was officially part of the Roman Church while Kievan Rus’ had chosen the Byzantine rite.2 The trading center at Lake Ladoga, which had been so prominent in the Viking period, was now overshadowed by the Novgorodian/Rus’ town of Novgorod a short distance to the

south. In southwestern Finland, the trading markets on the Åland Islands were mirrored on the mainland by growing urbanization at the site of modern-day Turku (Swedish – Åbo). That place is documented for the first time in the Arab geographical account written in 1154 by al-Idrisi.3

Derek Fewster warns us that perceptions of much of Finland’s conversion history are colored by changing political agendas and their impact on the interpretation of history. Finnish nationalism, arising like other nationalisms in the nineteenth century, sought to assert Finnish identity by emphasizing a forced and violent conversion inflicted on Finns by the Swedes. This scenario of Swedish coercion has often been taken for granted but with no more basis than scant documentary or archaeological evidence.4 Bearing this and other historiographical caveats outlined by Fewster in mind, we may review some of the modern arguments.

Linguistic evidence has long been valued for its preservation of the traces of prehistoric culture contacts. For example, language studies suggest that the first Christian influences in Finland came from the East since certain Christian ideas are represented by early Slavic loan words.5 Contact with Slavs in the Lake Ladoga region could account for the early language influences found in Karelia. Nevertheless, a borrowing of Orthodox vocabulary indicates only an exposure to Orthodoxy, not its widespread adoption, although some do argue that the early dating of the words justifies the conclusion that Karelians used them in religious contexts at that date. Linguistic evidence alone is insufficient basis for establishing religious conversion.

The search for evidence of early Karelian Orthodoxy is, of course, colored by a later Orthodox desire to lay prior claim to the religious heritage of the region. This is reflected likewise in traditions of early monastic foundations. In eastern Karelia, now part of Russia, Valamo (Russian, Valaam), thought to be the earliest Orthodox monastery in the area, was founded on Lake Ladoga traditionally in the year 992 but more likely in fact as late as the latter half of the fourteenth century. Another monastery in Lake Ladoga region, also once believed to have been older but now dated to 1393, was named Konevitsa.6

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5. Jutikkala and Pirinen, History of Finland, 41.