

# VIATOR

Viagem, circulação e  
mobilidade na Idade Média

Paulo Catarino Lopes, ed.



*VIATOR*  
Viagem, circulação e  
mobilidade na Idade Média

IEM – Instituto de Estudos Medievais

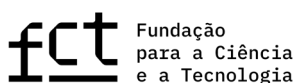
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*Editor*

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# Mercenaries, traders and missionaries: travelling in the Slavic realm before the year 1000

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## **Abstract**

The arrival of the Slavs in the fifth and sixth centuries to Central, Eastern and Southern Europe became eventually the last big reorganisation of territory in Eurasia after the fall of Rome. Many of these new Europeans engaged in various forms of travelling, either seeking economic gain or spiritual solace. Moreover, many of the new polities were formed as recently arrived, non-Slavic peoples exercised dominion over Slavic settlers. The first centuries of the history of the Slavs are, thus, permeated with trips and travels. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the economic, cultural and political impact of all these travels and how they contributed to the incorporation of these newly arrived peoples to the formation of Europe before the year 1000.

## **Keywords**

Central Europe; Eastern Europe; medieval trade; slavery; Cyrillo-Methodian mission

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**Mercenários, mercadores e missionários: viajar no reino eslavo antes do ano 1000**

**Resumo**

A chegada dos eslavos à Europa Central, Oriental e Meridional, nos séculos V e VI, acabou por ser a última grande reorganização do território da Eurásia após a queda de Roma. Muitos destes novos europeus envolveram-se em várias formas de viagem, quer em busca de ganhos económicos quer de consolo espiritual. Além disso, muitas das novas unidades políticas foram formadas quando os povos não eslavos recém-chegados exerceram o domínio sobre os colonos eslavos. Os primeiros séculos da história dos eslavos estão, portanto, permeados de viagens e deslocações. O objetivo deste capítulo é discutir o impacto económico, cultural e político de todas estas viagens e a forma como contribuíram para a incorporação destes povos recém-chegados na formação da Europa antes do ano 1000.

**Palavras-chave**

Europa Central; Europa de Leste; comércio medieval; escravatura; missão Cirilo-Metódica

**Nota Biográfica**

Susana Torres Prieto é Professora Titular de Humanidades na Universidade IE (Segóvia/Madrid) e Investigadora Associada no Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI), onde dirige um projeto de humanidades digitais sobre a cultura de Kyiv Rus'. A sua investigação centra-se na Idade Média eslava, com especial atenção aos diferentes aspectos da transmissão textual, incluindo o estudo da cultura

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On the promenade of the Greek city of Thessaloniki, a stone cross commemorates the journey of the brothers Cyril and Methodius, whose respective birth names were Constantine and Michael, from Constantinople to the newly established polities of the Slavs. Their missionary journey and its aftermath epitomise in many respects how relevant travelling was among the Slavs in the centuries immediately after their arrival to Eurasia. It also attests to the many difficulties the Slavs encountered in Europe, and is testimony to the most notable cultural and religious mission that the European continent has ever witnessed. Today, the number of Eurasian countries whose official languages are written in Cyrillic alphabet and whose national churches are Orthodox provide clear evidence that their journey, arduous as it was, was a success.

### The arrival of the Slavs

Although the evidence of the arrival of the Slavs to Eurasia is flimsy from the point of view of archaeology, undoubtedly due to their lack of use of metals and of employment of any form of writing, it seems that it could be dated around the fifth or sixth centuries<sup>1</sup>. Jordanes and Procopius of Caesarea both mention them in the middle of the sixth century, and so does the Byzantine emperor Maurice (539-602) in his *Strategikon*, for example, among other sources. The Byzantines encountered the Slavs mainly in the Balkans, although Procopius notes, in the successive revisions made to his own work, the *Buildings*, newly added names of fortifications not only in the Western Balkans, but also along the Danube, in response to incursions by Slavs in the mid sixth century<sup>2</sup>. Later on, around the eighth and ninth centuries, Frankish and Carolingian sources place Western Slavs

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1 In recent years, the archaeologist Florin Curta has proposed that the term Slavs (or *Sclavenes*) is too elusive in exogenous written sources, where it seems to be often confused with the name of another people, the Antes, to point to a clear denomination of a single people. Moreover, according to him, the archaeological evidence would not match the chronology of settlements apparently given by the sources. All this leads him to conclude that the term *Sclavenes* was not really an ethnonym, and that they certainly did not migrate from the East into Europe at any given time. He rather proposes that the term simply referred in the sources to those settlers in the fringes of the Byzantine Empire with whom the Byzantines enter into contact, as did subsequently the peoples of the Carolingian Empire. While maybe a far too strong philological bias was characteristic of nineteenth century historiography, and Slavs is certainly a term that ultimately only refers to speakers of a Slavic language, and the linguistic evidence is equally incontestable, despite the frustrating lack of metal object or endogenous written evidence. For a detailed study of his theories, see CURTA, Florin – *The Making of the Slavs. History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region c. 500-700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, and CURTA, Florin – *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

2 See SHEPARD, Jonathan – “Superpower to soft power, within overlapping circles: Byzantium and its place in twenty-first-century international History”. in Barbara Haider-Wilson et al. (eds.) – *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie Und Praxis*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017, 81-122, p. 93.

in modern Austria, Istria and Pomerania. It should not be forgotten that the dates in the sources only provide evidence of the moment when the Slavs entered into the radar of these literate, established peoples, either due to war or trade, or both, and do not indicate necessarily settlement dates.

One of the first proper names that crawls into the sources is that of Samo (d. 658/9)<sup>3</sup>. Not much is known about him, and less still would be known if it were not for the fact that he is often mentioned heading the first Slavic proto-state, also known as Samo's Confederation. He was in fact of Frankish origin, and probably a trader who, according to Fredegar, led the Slavs in 624 in their uprising against the Avars, with whom they had previously collaborated, probably forcibly. Fredegar knew about this because the combined forces of Avars and Slavs had already entered the Frankish region of Thuringia. Samo, who according to the Frankish chronicler, had twelve Slavic wives and thirty-seven children, became a foreign ruler over a predominant Slavic population, a scenario that will be repeated elsewhere among the Slavs, but his confederation did not survive him. If what Fredegar says is true, Samo would have made the journey from Frankish territory to the fringes of the Merovingian kingdom in times of Clothar II as a trader and then became the elected king of the Slavs of that region<sup>4</sup>.

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3 Aside from Fredegar, whose testimony, analysed further down, is the most extensive, other sources also mention Samo, such as Regino of Prüm's *Chronicle*, under the years 605-611: "king Dagobert fought with the Slaves (*Sclavis*) and overcame them. At that time a *dux (dux)* named Samo ruled over them. He also restrained the rebellious Gascons with the sword. The Huns and Bulgars (*Vulgares*) joined in battle among themselves. The Huns defeated the Bulgars. Utterly defeated and driven from Pannonia, nine thousand with their wives and children appealed to King Dagobert for land they needed to live on. The king ordered that they be received in scattered houses in Bavaria for the winter, and one night he ordered them all to be killed together with their wives and children". All these facts are further confirmed in the *Gesta Dagoberti* [MGH SRM 2]. Bruno Krusch (ed.). Hannover: s.n., 1888, 396-425, cols. 27, 28 and 36. The English translation is quoted from *History and Politics in Late Carolingian and Ottonian Europe. The Chronicle of Regino of Prüm and Adalbert of Magdeburg*. Transl. Simon Maclean. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009, 108. The terms in brackets correspond to the Latin terms in the original as edited by Migne in PL, T. 37.

4 In the chapter 48 of Book IV of his chronicle we are told: "Anno XL regni Chlothariae homo nomen Samo, natione Francos de pago Senonago, plures secum negotiantes adciuit, exercendum negucium in Sclauos coinomento Vuinedos perrexit. Sclauuam contra Auaris coinomento Chunis et regem eorum Gagano ceperant reuellare. Vuinidi Befulci Chunis fuerant iam ab antiquo ut cum Chuni in exercitum contra gentem qualibet adgredebant, Chuni pro castra adunatum illorum stabant exercitum, Vuinidi uero pugnabant. Si ad uincendum preualebant, tunc Chuni predas capiendum adgredebant; sin autem Vuinidi superabantur (f. 145, V<sup>o</sup>). Chunorum auxilio fulti uirebus resumebant; ideo Befulci uocabantur a Chunis eo quod dublicem in congressione certamine uestila priliae facientes ante Chunis prederint. Chuni aemandum annis singulis in Esclauos ueniebant, uxores Sclauorum et filias eorum strato sumebant, tributa super alias oppressiones Sclaui Chunis soluebant. Filii Chunorum quos in uxores Vuinodorum et filias generauerunt tandem non subferentes maliciam ferre et oppressione Chunorum dominacione negantes ut supra memine ceperant reuellare. Cum in exercito Vuinidi contra Chunos fuissent adgressi Samo negucians quo memorau superius cum ipsos in exercito perrexit, ibique tanta ei fuit utilitas de Chunis facta u mirum fuisset et nimia multitudo ex eis gladio Vuinidorum trucidata fuisset. Vuinidi cernentes utilitatem Samones eum super se eligunt regem, ubi XXX et V annos regnauit feciliter. Plures prelia contra Chunis suo regimini Vuinidi iniaerunt suo consilio et utilitate Vuinidi semper Chunos superant. Samo XII uxores ex genere Vuinidorum habebat de quibus XXII filius et quindecim filias habuit." MONOD, Gabriel – *Scholasticus Fredegarius. Études critiques sur les sources de l'histoire mérovingienne*. Paris: A. Francke, 1872, 138-139.

Something similar also happened in Bulgaria with the Turkic steppe people, the Bulgars, arriving from Asia around 679 to settle in the southern banks of the Danube. The Bulgars were originally inhabitants of the area between the lower Volga river and the lower Dnieper, to the north of the sea of Azov. The lower Volga is where, centuries later, the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan (c. 879- c. 960) would find them. Following the demise of Avar power in Europe, after their defeat in Constantinople in 626 and the definitive surrender of their Danubian state to Charlemagne in 795-796, the Bulgars, led by their leader Asparuh (d. 701) chose the south Danubian basin, an area already inhabited by Slavs, to settle themselves. According to the *Chronicle of George Syncellus, sub anno* 6171 AM (679/690 AD) they entered the Danube delta, expelled the Byzantines and “became the masters of the seven tribes of Sclavini” that dwelled there. They were, in fact, the first Slavic state that Byzantium recognised as such in a treaty dated 681, probably due to their military might. They were so successful that in 813, under the leadership of Krum (r. 808-814), they arrived at the gates of Constantinople. Their dominions increased dramatically, from their initial capital at Pliska, and they were by the time of Simeon I (893-927), without any doubt, the largest and most powerful Slav state in Europe. From the Turkic origins of the ruling elite, only a few words remained. In the meantime, they intermarried and adopted the Slavic language and culture and become Christians. Soon the First Bulgarian Empire was the biggest threat to the Byzantine empire on the Western frontier. Only the strong collaboration of Byzantium with Rus’ mercenaries managed to weaken them until Basil II managed to secure an ignominious defeat over them in 1014, which gained him the sobriquet “the Bulgar slayer”.

A similar scenario developed centuries later in Kyivan Rus’, whither Viking traders arrived from south Scandinavia in search of trade routes to Byzantium and Khazaria, the most relevant emporium of the Silk Route at the time dominating the northern steppes of the Black and Caspian seas. The Khazars were of Turkic origin and Jewish religion<sup>5</sup>, and rose to prominence in the decades immediately after the death of the prophet Muhammad, when they managed to contain the advances of the Muslim armies towards Europe. As such, it was in the interest of Byzantium to

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5 In fact, Constatine-Cyril, who led with his brother Methodius the Christianisation mission among the Slavs (see below) was sent to Khazaria by the Patriarch of Constantinople to try to convince the khazars to adopt Orthodox Christianity. He was sent to engage in public debate with Jewish scholars at the capital, a task for which, according to his *Vita*, Cyril learnt Hebrew and the Torah. The *khagan* and his subjects finally adopted Judaism as state religion, but the experience was undoubtedly useful for his future endeavour among Slavs. This fact, alongside the above-mentioned dynastic marriages, gives a clear picture of the level of interest that Byzantium had in fostering an alliance with the Khazar *khaganate*. The *Vita Constantini* offers a date around 860, but numismatic evidence attests to a formal adoption of Judaism as state religion around the 830s. See KOVALEV, Roman K. – “Creating Khazar identity through coins. The special issue of Dirhams of 837/8”. in Florin Curta (ed.) – *East Central & Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 220-253.

have them as a buffer state in the often unstable Eastern frontier. As Peter Frankopan affirms: “So important were the Khazars as allies that in the early eight century two marriage alliances were arranged between the ruling houses of Khazaria and Byzantium”<sup>6</sup>. By the tenth century, its capital Atil, royal residence of their no longer nomad *khagan*, was one of the busiest confluences of the Silk route: where traders from the capital of the Caliphate, Baghdad, from northern Scandinavia as well as those arriving from Samarkand all met, by land, or crossing the Black or the Caspian seas, or descending the Volga, at the markets of Khazaria. The Vikings were expert sailors, and they quickly learnt how to make their boats smaller so they could follow the course of the rivers Dnieper and Volga. If they were initially lured by the fur trade, whose monopoly was in Khazars’ hands at the time, they soon became involved in the more profitable business of slave trading. They opened the famous route from the Varangians to the Greeks, which is in the origin of the prosperous polity of Kyivan Rus’, as well as another one across the northern steppes along the Volga to Atil. As in the case of Samo or the Bulgars, foreign traders assumed the leading political role in the organisation of the new state. Despite the oft-repeated sentimental tale of how the Varangians became ruling princes of Kyivan Rus’ as presented in their foundational chronicle, the *Primary Chronicle* or *Tale of Bygone Years* (*Povest’ vremennykh let*), which states that the Rus’ descendants of Riurik were invited by the Slavs to rule over them, a less favourable tale suggests that, most likely, the Rus’ traded heavily in Slavic slaves, aside from in furs and in amber, wax or honey. In order to do so, they must have already subdued them militarily and coerced them, similarly to what apparently the Avars had done to the Western Slavs before they were ‘liberated’ by Samo. The difference is that, in this case, as with the Bulgars in the Balkans, the Rus’ became the political elite that traded with them, only to be eventually assimilated socially and linguistically.

In any case, it seems that it was the prosperity offered by the trade routes and the demand for Slavic slaves, mainly from the Caliphate, which lured the non-Slavic peoples into the Slavic speaking lands.

## Traders and mercenaries

Our general understanding of what happened in the period between the arrival of the Slavs and the year 1000 relies mainly on written accounts and archaeological findings. With the former, the situation is further complicated in the case of the Slavs before Christianisation, since all written evidence is provided by others, and not themselves given they did not use any form of writing. Therefore, we only know

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<sup>6</sup> FRANKOPAN, Peter – *The Silk Roads*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, 108.

about what surprised, bothered or annoyed other peoples, but not what the Slavs knew or thought about themselves or the peoples they encountered. Thus, one should expect many of these written sources are biased. In the area of archaeology, the Slavs did not seem to have been skilled in metalwork, only in working with perishable materials. These two facts complicate substantially our understanding of the history of the Slavs prior to their Christianisation, rendering challenging scenarios for scholars.

In studying trade in the Middle Ages, which seems to have been extremely relevant for the establishment of the first Slavic polities, a couple of caveats should be borne in mind<sup>7</sup>. Firstly, a very high proportion of trade, particularly local trade, was made by bartering, in the exchange of some goods for others, often both perishable. This trade leaves no archaeological trace behind, and it is only occasionally mentioned in some official documents when the goods exchanged are in a large quantities or as anecdotes in literary sources. In the case of the slave trade, which seems to have been much more widespread in the Middle Ages than traditionally thought; slaves are what some scholars have termed a “silent commodity”<sup>8</sup>. Unlike weapons, luxury items, jewellery or even silk, slaves have not left a very obvious visible trace, which does not mean they have not left any at all. As with all the above-mentioned items, slaves were traded for the consumption of the elites, and not average people, and therefore the routes of this particular trade necessarily end in politically or economically powerful cities. Many of the ordinary, everyday, barter trade would have used the same routes, but, when this was not the case, the evidence is almost totally lost to us. So we can study trade routes using written sources and archaeology, but only the of those goods consumed by powerful elites. It is therefore a partial study of trade, not all of the trade.

Despite Steve Runciman’s insistence that slave trade was condemned by the Church and not carried out by or with Christians in the Byzantine empire, it seems undeniable that Slavs were heavily traded and that some of the traders were members of the same non-Slavic elites that had become their first acknowledge rulers, Christian or not<sup>9</sup>. It is estimated that in the city of Córdoba alone, when it was the capital of the Caliphate, there were more than 13,000 male Slavic slaves

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7 See GIEYSZTOR, Aleksander – “Trade and industry in Eastern Europe before 1200”. in Cynthia Postan *et al.* (eds.) – *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire. Volume 2: Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 474-524.

8 On the relevance of slave trade in the European Middle Ages, see the groundbreaking and exceptionally detailed McCORMICK, Michael – *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300-900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, esp. 237-269.

9 RUNCIMAN, Steven – “Byzantine trade and industry”. in Cynthia Postan *et al.* (eds.) – *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire. Volume 2: Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 132-167.

in 961<sup>10</sup>. According to David Abulafia, in the eleventh century: “Saqaliba or Slav dynasties of southern Spain were created by descendants of east European slaves who had been bought for service in the bodyguards of Moorish rulers”<sup>11</sup>. In recent years, specialists had taken a closer look at the role of slavery in the emergence Slavic states. As Marek Jankowiak, whose research focuses on Slave trade in medieval Central and Eastern Europe, asserts:

“What makes them such an ideal case study is their high visibility in texts produced in the Islamic world between the early 9th and early 11th centuries. Arab geographers and diplomats investigated their origins, while archaeological material, primarily hundreds of thousands of *dirhams* found in Scandinavia and the Slavic lands, provides traces of the slave trade. By combining these strands of evidence, we can build an exceptionally detailed image of slave trade systems that supplied Saqaliba to the Islamic markets”<sup>12</sup>.

Combining all the evidence at our disposal, limited as it might seem, and, most importantly, analysing it from a fresh point of view, there are so me trade routes that can be clearly traced across Slavic territory in the Middle Ages. Firstly, a major trade route, which clearly included slave trade, across Great Moravia and later Bohemia. This route started in Great Moravia in the ninth century, maybe in the city of Mikulčice, although we cannot be completely sure. The Bohemian city of Prague will eventually become its neuralgic centre from the tenth century onwards. By the time the Al-Andalus Sephardic traveller Ibn-Yaqub visited Prague in the mid-tenth century, it was already bustling with trade:

“And the city of Prague is made of stone and lime. In merchandise it is the richest of the land. The Rus and the Slavs come there with merchandise from the city of Cracow. And the Moslems, Jews, and Turks come to them from the land of the Turks also with goods and commercial cargo and take out slaves, tin, and various furs. Their lands are the best of the lands of the peoples of the

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10 Although this number, offered by ABULAFIA, David – “Africa, Asia and the trade of Medieval Europe”. in Cynthia Postan *et al.* (eds.) – *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire. Volume 2: Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 402-473, p. 417, has been subsequently repeated in other historical works (ck. Frankopan, *The Silk Roads...*, 120), Abulafia does not offer any supporting evidence as to how does he account for such an amount. Regardless, it is clear that Slavs were coveted as slaves in medieval Europe and the Middle East.

11 Abulafia, “Africa, Asia...”, 417.

12 See JANKOWIAK, Marek – “What does the slave trade in the *Saqaliba* tell us about early Islamic slavery?”. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49, 1 (2017), 169-172 and, more generally, BIERMANN, Felix; JANKOWIAK, Marek – *The Archaeology of Slavery in Early Medieval Northern Europe: The Invisible Commodity*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021, particularly the chapter JANKOWIAK, Marek – “Tracing the Saqaliba. Slave trade and the archaeology of the Slavic lands in the tenth century”, 161-181.

North and are best supplied with livestock. For one denarius they sell as much wheat as a man needs for a month, and for one denarius they sell as much barley as one horse needs for forty nights, and for one denarius they sell ten hens. In the city of Prague they make saddles, bridles, and shields of inferior quality which are used in their lands. In the land of Bohemia they make light cloth of very delicate fabric in the manner of a net which is not good for anything. In any season its price is ten pieces of cloth for one denarius and with them they buy and sell. And they keep them in stock. And they represent for them property and the value of things, they buy for them wheat, flour, horses, gold, silver, and all kinds of things<sup>13</sup>.”

His detailed description of the city and its trade was probably facilitated by his ties with the Jewish community of the Radhanites, expert travellers in the Middle Ages whose networks expanded from China to Cordoba<sup>14</sup>. In a meaningful anecdote depicted in the door of Gniezno cathedral (c. 1170), St. Adalbert of Prague is credited with requesting Boleslaw II, Duke of Bohemia, to release Christian slaves from their masters, Radhanite Jews, often depicted with a pointed hat. The Central European Route brought to Prague goods from Rus' and Khazaria, but also whatever could be loaded into boats down the Danube to Bulgaria. From Prague, a western route continues the trade through Regensburg and Verdun to the Caliphate of Córdoba and onwards to North Africa via the Al-Andalus port of Almería. Another southern branch went to Venice, either through the ancient Amber Road, or via the Eastern March and Bavaria, across the Alps, and thence to the Middle East<sup>15</sup>. Until the arrival of the Magyars, the often unstable area of the Pannonia had to be avoided via the Adriatic coast or through Kyiv via Cracow.

The Amber Road had been famous since the Roman Empire. It connects the North and Baltic seas with Venice and Aquileia, on the Adriatic coast. Starting from the city of Riga, it went down to the port of Gdansk, on the Baltic and from

13 The text was edited by HAVLÍK, Lubomír E. (ed.) – *Magnae Moraviae Fontes Historici*. Vol. 3. Brno: Universita J. E. Purkyně, 1969, 413-414. The English translation is to be found in SCHENKER, Alexander M. – *The Dawn of Slavic. An Introduction to Slavic Philology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 46.

14 The routes of the Radhanites are well described by ibn Khordadbeh (c. 825-913), public servant in the Abbasid Caliphate, in his *Book of Roads and Kingdoms (Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik)*. He mentions four routes: one from Frank lands to Pelusium, in the Nile delta, from which the travel the Arabian Peninsula southwards by camel to embark in Medina or Jeddah to India and China. A second one will take them from Pelusium to Constantinople. Another will take them also from Pelusium to the banks of the Euphrates in modern Iraq via Antioch, eventually reaching Baghdad. A third one will take them for Frankish lands down the Iberian peninsula and then across the Mediterranean to northern Africa and to China via Damascus. A fourth one, crossing Slav territory, will eventually take them to Khazaria and from there, via the Silk Route, to China as well. Ibn Khordadbeh mentions they traded with female slaves, eunuchs, boys, brocade, furs, swords and spices.

15 For a detailed analysis of the compelling evidence of the slave trade in this route, particularly the analysis of newly digged archaeological sites in the area, see MACHÁČEK, Jiří – “Slave trade in Great Moravia. Reality or fiction?”. in Felix Biermann; Marek Jankowiak (eds.) – *The Archaeology of Slavery in Early Medieval Northern Europe*. Cham: Springer, 2021, 110-130.

there, across Poland, to the very important Bohemian trade centre of Olomouc and continued pass the Moravian city of Devin to Ljubljana, then Aquilea and finishing in Venice. As such, it cut across several of the main European rivers and allows us to understand the pattern of settlements in Central and Eastern Europe since Late Antiquity. It was one of the main trade routes for the Western Slavs as well as the Vikings, and particularly the Rus', who could trade between the Volga Bulgars and Khazaria and the Central European markets without having to go through Constantinople.

The above-mentioned famous route from the Varangians to the Greeks runs almost parallel to the Amber Road, a few parallels to the east. The scholarly attention it has received since the nineteenth century has more to do with the ontological national question of who were the ancestors of modern Russians (the so-called Normandist polemic) than with any previously unknown direction of trade. What was certainly an innovation, and as such impressed Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetos, so much so that he described it in his *De Administrando Imperio*, was the newly acquired skill of the Rus' to navigate the Dnieper downstream, thus avoiding having to negotiate with the Khazars, the Radhanites or any other group that covered the horizontal trade routes from Eurasia. By arriving directly at the gates of the imperial capital, this gain was clearly multiplied. Moreover, by linking the trade between the two most relevant cities of their new polity, Novgorod in the north and Kyiv in the south, they also opened the possibility of trading directly with the Baltic, German and eventually Hanseatic ports from the north, and with the Khazars and the steppe peoples, from the south<sup>16</sup>.

Although we are not very sure about when exactly did the Rus' arrive to Constantinople for the first time, the mid-ninth century seems a quite plausible date. According to the *Primary Chronicle*, the first expedition of the Rus' to Constantinople took place in 866. Byzantine sources place the attack rather in 860. In any case, it was repelled, apparently, thanks to a miraculous intervention of the Virgin. Another source, however, seems to contradict this date. The *Annals of Saint Bertin* (an abbey in Saint-Omer, in Pas-de-Calais) attest to the arrival of a Byzantine diplomatic mission to Ingelheim, to the court of Louis the Pious, in 839. Within this mission, there were, apparently, members who self-identified as

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16 The relevance of Novgorod in the history of Kyivan Rus' and Muscovy later can hardly be overstated. Despite establishing the political capital at Kyiv, the Rus' never lost sight of the relevance of the northern city, and, in due time, it will become so economically strong and independent, that ruling it from such a distance became problematical. It is hardly surprising that the first thing that a newly appointed Kyivan prince always did was to send his heir apparent to the see of Novgorod. Its economic and political organisation was complex and extremely powerful, even before the ruling princes of Kyiv. The traders accessed the Gulf of Finland by following the Volkhov river upstream until the Lake Ladoga and from there to the Baltic Sea. The amount of trade became so relevant that Novgorod eventually became a *kontor* of the Hanseatic League and developed its own German neighbourhood.

belonging to a nation with the name of Rus' (*Rhos*) whose king, whom they call *chaganus* (khagan) had sent them to be by the side of Byzantine emperor Theophilos due to their friendship. They requested permission from Louis to cross his territory to go back to Constantinople and back to their homeland. Louis found out that they really belonged to the people of the Swedes (*gentis Sueonum*), and suspected they were really spies at the Byzantine court, whose long detour to the West in order to reach Constantinople made little sense, and therefore decided to hold them until he could take further decisions. These Rus' might have been indeed spies within the unexpected Byzantine delegation or might have been mercenaries, or even slave traders, working for the Byzantine court, whose aspect recommended a royal safe-conduct to continue their journey. The fact that their appearance as diplomats or mercenaries predates the first organised attack on Constantinople does not necessarily invalidate either testimony or either date. It could have well been that the Rus' did render some services to the Byzantines before deciding to exact better trading conditions by besieging the capital (which they eventually obtained in 911 when Oleg launched his successful attack)<sup>17</sup>. If we can more or less date by archaeological evidence the first settlements in Staria Ladoga in the mid-eighth century and their presence in lake Ladoga in the mid-ninth, it is not impossible to suppose that they would have already arrived in Constantinople as traders, and maybe mercenaries, by the turn of the century.

## Missionaries

Without a doubt, one of the most fascinating journeys, for many reasons, was the missionary expedition by Cyril and Methodius<sup>18</sup>. It was promoted and encouraged by the Patriarch Photios (c. 810- c. 893), who, eager to antagonise the Pope in Rome, readily responded to the request of the Moravian prince Rastislav (r. 846-870) by sending both brothers to preach to the Slavs in their own language, instead of Latin. Until that point, Slavic was only an oral language, without a proper alphabet. We have some epigraphic evidence that runes might have been tentatively used in Bulgaria, and at some point, not very successfully, the Latin alphabet had been accommodated, albeit poorly, to Slavic sounds<sup>19</sup>. The first task of the brothers, particularly of Cyril,

<sup>17</sup> See GONNEAU, Pierre – *Novgorod. Histoire et archéologie d'une république russe médiévale (970-1478)*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> The Council of Europe has an excellent webpage dedicated to all aspects of the Cyril and Methodius Route: <https://www.cyril-methodius.cz>. A full account with all available sources can be found in Schenker, *The Dawn of Slavic...*, 25-43.

<sup>19</sup> The Freising Fragments, datable between 998 and 1027, are the oldest extant attempt to use the Latin alphabet (Carolingian minuscule) to record a Slavic text. They probably attest to some early Bavarian missionary activity around the cities of Regensburg and Passau. They are five folia in parchment containing confessional and

who seemed to have been the most linguistically talented of the two, was to create an alphabet (the Glagolitic script) to adequately represent all the sounds of a language that, at that time, must have been still relatively homogenous across all the linguistic areas of the Slavs. The very attempt to deliver liturgy in Slavic, though not such a shocking phenomenon among the oriental Orthodox Churches, where liturgies in Armenian, Georgian or other languages were being used since Late Antiquity, came into direct conflict with the position of Rome, who refused to admit the liturgy in any other language than Latin or Greek. In the end, it was a fight for the religious area of influence of either the Patriarchate of Constantinople or the Papacy of Rome, which eventually meant a political influence by the Byzantine or the Holy Roman empires.

This was not the first mission of a similar type for either brother. Constantine-Cyril had been previously sent in 850/851 to Baghdad, the capital of the Caliphate and, most importantly, a decade later to the capital of Khazaria (see note 5). His brother Methodius had served as military governor in the theme of Strymon, in south Macedonia, where one of his duties during his decade of service there had been to attempt the Christianisation of the Slavs inhabiting that part of the Empire. In 851 he became hegumenos of the monastery of Polychron in mount Olympos, where he was eventually joined by his brother after the return of the latter from Khazaria. It was whilst returning from Attila that Constantine managed to obtain the relics of St. Clement in Cherson and take them with him. These relics will be of extreme importance in the future of their mission.

The Thessaloniki brothers started their journey in 862 or 863. The petition to the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate had only been sent by prince Rastislav in 862. The sources do not tell us precisely which route they took from Constantinople, or from their monastery on Mount Olympus in Bithynia/Mysia, present day Uludağ in Turkey, up to the land of the Grand Moravia, which is in current Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Two alternative routes were available: the first, exclusively by land, would have taken them through the ancient city of Plovdiv in Bulgaria, up through modern Serbia and Hungary, to the lands of the Grand Moravia near the modern Slovak capital of Bratislava. Whilst this route is more direct, the instability of this area at that time makes it more likely that the route taken was by sea. This other used the old Roman *Via Egnatia*, linking Constantinople with the Adriatic port of Epidamnus/Dyrrhachion (currently Durrës in Albania) via Thessaloniki. From there they would have sailed to Venice, and from the Italian city, following the safe merchant Amber Road from Aquileia via Pannonia (Hungary) up to Moravia.

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baptismal formulas and exhortations to penitence according to the Roman rite. The Slavic text is written in the margins of a Latin MS. A non-adapted Latin alphabet was used to transcribe the Slavic, and there was, therefore, confusion between phonemes and their graphic representations.

We do not know exactly where in Great Moravia they stayed, but we can surmise that their activities took place in the territory between Mikulčice (today in South Moravia, almost in the border between Slovakia and the Czech Republic) and Staré Město, currently in the Czech region of Zlín. After three and a half years, they were called to Rome by pope Nicholas I, who had yielded to the complaints of the German clergy in their accusations of incurring in the so-called Trilingual or Pilatian heresy, which using any other language in liturgy than the ones used by Pilate in the Cross of Christ (Greek, Latin and Hebrew) was heretic. Apparently, another problem arose as neither of brothers had the rank of bishop and therefore did not have the authority to appoint new members of the clergy, trained by them in Slavonic. Moreover, their status, whether they were dependent on the Patriarchate of Constantinople or the Papacy in Rome, was also under discussion. In any case, by this time Rastislav had lost interest in the Christianisation and had also almost lost his kingdom, so the situation of the Byzantine missionaries became increasingly precarious, especially as Photius had been deposed back in Constantinople. Forgotten by the Patriarchate, politically in the hands of the Frankish kingdom and under attack by the German clergy, who did not want to have newly converted Christians preached in anything but Latin, their only way out was to try to convince the Pope in person of the validity of their mission, in order to have the authority to continue.

At the end of year 866, they started their journey to Rome. They passed by the capital of Lower Pannonia near Lake Balaton, where the Bulgarian Duke Kocel welcomed them and where, we know, they taught their newly-created Glagolitic alphabet. Then they stopped again in Venice at the end of 867, where they disputed with members of the German clergy once more about the possibility of praying and celebrating in Slavonic.

They were welcomed upon their arrival to Rome precisely because they were carrying with them the relics of St. Clement of Rome, fourth Pope (92-99) and the first Apostolic Father. The whole episode, however, turned bittersweet. Nicholas I, the pope who had called them to Rome, died in November 867, without having had the opportunity of listening to their claims. A month later Adrien II was proclaimed pope. Luckily for them, he was more favourable than his predecessor to their mission and approved the use of liturgical books in Slavonic and the use of Slavonic for general liturgical purposes. Methodius was ordained bishop and a group of their pupils were ordained as priests or deacons. Unfortunately, Constantine had fallen ill in the last few months and, after fulfilling his wish to die as a monk, passed away on February 4th, 869. He was buried in the church of St. Clemente Laterano in Rome, next to the relics he had himself brought to the ancient capital.

After that, Methodius returned to Pannonia, where the Bulgarian duke Kocel requested his presence to pope Adrian II in order to continue with the Christianising

mission they had started on their way to Rome. He was appointed bishop of Pannonia by the pope and returned there with his disciples in 870. Nevertheless, the German clergy could not accept this and, despite the papal protection, his remaining disciples in Moravia were brutally expelled and sold as slaves by Svatopluk when he deposed his uncle Rastislav with the help of the Franks. Methodius himself was arrested and brought before the Imperial Diet in Regensburg, where he was accused of the same old charges by the bishop of Salzburg, Adalvin, and subsequently sentenced and incarcerated in a Bavarian monastery. Only after three years, when the new pope John VIII learnt about his situation and forbade the Bavarian bishops to celebrate mass, was Methodius released. After this, he was escorted back to Pannonia to continue his work and the last decade of his life seems to have been a busy series of trips between Pannonia, Great Moravia, Rome and even Constantinople. After his death in 885, however, he could no longer secure the destiny of his own disciples in Great Moravia, given the change in position of the new pope Stephen V, who finally proscribed the liturgy in Slavonic. Most of his disciples in Great Moravia were either captured and sold as slaves, among them maybe Constantine of Preslav, while a few managed to escape. A curious anecdote tells how three of these monks, Clement, Naum and Angelarius, apparently managed to build a raft and floated down the Danube to Belgrade, which at that time was a Bulgarian frontier town. They eventually reached Pliska, the first capital of the First Bulgarian Empire, where they were welcomed by the Bulgarian khan Boris I (r. 852-889), who needed experts to complete the Christianisation process started in 865. And it is there, in Bulgaria at the apex of its political and cultural expansion, where the Cyrillo-Methodian mission will finally find a place to flourish. This is where Cyrillic script was created by their disciples and where, in the monastic scriptoria of Preslav and Ohrid, Old Church Slavonic will be finally develop as a liturgical and literary language.

This was certainly not the only missionary trip undertaken by the Slavs. We have plenty of written evidence from members of the German clergy of their encounters with north western Slavs and their attempts to convert them. From Adam of Bremen (d. 1016) to the bishop Thietmar of Merseburg (975-1018) or Helmold of Bosau, who wrote in the mid-twelfth century a specific *Chronicle of the Slavs* (*Helmodi presbyteri chronica Slavorum*), all their accounts have been extremely valuable, though sometimes hopelessly biased, in trying to understand Slavic paganism and cosmology. The rulers of the first Slavic states occasionally turned either to Constantinople or Rome or any other religious hierarchy for supporting the Christianisation of their subjects. Aside from the above-mentioned change of heart of Rastislav, who requested the mission of Cyril and Methodius and subsequently supported the views of the German clergy, there was Stefan II Nemanjić (1165-1228), prince of Serbia, who was, maybe wrongfully, known as the

“Twice Crowned” as he allegedly received his first crown from the Pope and then was crowned by his own brother Sava, head of the Orthodox Serbian church. While two coronations might not have taken place, it is clear that he, like other rulers, was more interested in the geopolitics, and maybe the economics, involved in the process of Christianisation, than in the formulation of the Trinitarian processions<sup>20</sup>. Another example is Olga (d. 969), widow of prince Igor, regent in Kyivan Rus’ for her son Sviatoslav, who rendered services to the Byzantine emperor against the Bulgars and the Khazars. After her husband’s death, she became regent in 925. In an often repeated episode, she travelled to Constantinople to be baptised, receiving the name of Helena as her baptismal name, and seeking an Orthodox Christianisation of her subjects. She also used the trip to negotiate various other agreements with the emperor, from trade quotas to military support for the emperor. The visit took place in the mid-950s, but it is unknown when exactly and how long it lasted, although it is surmised that it lasted at least a couple of years. Apparently, the visit did not end on very good terms, and by the year 959, Olga approached Otto of Saxony to ask for Christian missionaries. According to Adalbert’s *Continuation of the Chronicle of Regino of Prüm*: “Legates of Helen, queen of the Rus’ [*reginae Rugorum*], who had been baptized in Constantinople under the Constantinopolitan emperor Romanus, came to the king and asked (falsely, as became clear later) that a bishop and priests be appointed to that people”<sup>21</sup>.

Further down, *sub anno* 961, we learn that it was the author himself, Adalbert of Magdeburg, who was chosen for the mission:

By the contrivance and counsel of Archbishop William [of Mainz], Adalbert from the monks of St-Maximin [in Trier] was appointed to be sent abroad in his place, even though he expected better from William and had never done anything to offend him. With his accustomed mercy, the most pious king equipped him with all the supplies he needed and sent him with honour to the people of the Rus’.

It was clearly not a mission Adalbert looked forward too, either because he had already suspected the reasons were spurious or because he felt there was not much to be gained from that part of the world, where Christians, if any, seemed to be happy to follow the Orthodox conventions of the Patriarchate in Constantinople.

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20 Among the many differences between the Catholic Church in Rome and the Orthodox Church of Constantinople, it has often been adduced that the inclusion of the word ‘*filioque*’ in the Creed by the Frankish clergy was key in leading to the schism of 1054. It was most probably a minor, and very little known question, among the many liturgical, hierarchical and other non-religious issues that forced the split of the European Church into two.

21 Again, the English translation of this and the following fragments is quoted from Maclean, *History and Politics...*, 260-263. The terms in brackets correspond to the Latin terms in the original as edited by Migne in PL, T. 37. On Olga/Helena’s policy towards Byzantium and Western Christianity, see J. Shepard’s analysis in FRANKLIN, Simon; SHEPARD, Jonathan – *The Emergence of Rus 750-1200*. London: Longman, 1996, 133-137.

Of course the author himself is writing all this with the benefit of hindsight, because we learn in entry of the following year:

In the same year Adalbert, who had been ordained as bishop of the Rus', returned, realising that he could not accomplish any of the things that he had been sent to do and that he was tiring himself out in vain; some of his men were killed on the way home, and he himself only just escaped with great effort. When he came to the king he was received with love and embraced and supported like a brother with all good things and comforts by Archbishop William, beloved of God, to make up for the very troublesome pilgrimage that he had engineered for him.

Whether Olga only requested Otto's mission to force the Byzantines to implement the agreements she had negotiated with them, or whether Otto had a particular interest in trying to win over the East Slavs to his church, is something that cannot be ascertained. What might be more interesting, though, is to understand what lay behind these fluctuations of Slavic rulers between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople.

It is clear by this point that each of the churches in Rome or Constantinople, despite being still nominally a single church until the Schism of 1054, were pursuing their own agendas. More importantly each served a different political leader whose antagonism for economic and political influence in Europe was only increasing, particularly in the years after Charlemagne. In this scenario, the control of the trade routes, and its cargo, was paramount in the alliances each new player was fighting for. It is important to remember, in view of the above evidence, that Christianisation did not only mean adopting more or less willingly a new understanding of the world or even the many advantages of writing, but also a guarantee against being enslaved, theoretically. And this was only the case if one was Christianised by the Church acknowledged or controlling the territory one inhabited, as the stories of the Slavic monks, or of Methodius or Adalbert, themselves remind us. One not only had to be Christian, but the right type of Christian as well, so the political and trading elites of the area would not enslave one's people. This might be a more powerful reason for any new leader to adopt one or another form of religion than the wording of the Creed or the details of liturgy. In a nutshell, if there is a pattern that seems to repeat itself among Slavic peoples before the year 1000 is that many Slavic speaking groups were enslaved and heavily traded with while the demand for Saqaliba slaves remained high in the Caliphate, basically until the eleventh century. Many of the trading elites that probably arrived in areas already inhabited by Slavs eventually became their political and economic elites (by intermarriage) and considered that it was time to enslave other peoples, rather than their own. In this endeavour, in the transition from traders to princes, Christianisation was a great aid: once their subjects were Christians, they could not be enslaved, neither by them nor by anyone

else. Before the year 1000, the same routes that brought to the Slavs their exploiters also eventually brought them their safe-conduct as free human beings. It is quite likely that they would not have had the benefit of the latter without the former.

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