

Project Description

Varangians and Slavs as Byzantium's Threat in 18th and 19th Century Russian Pictorial and Textual Culture.



*Vasnetsov, Viktor Mikhailovich (1899):
Oleg of Novgorod*

Oleg of Novgorod, who is on the picture on the side¹, was, according to the chronicle “Povest’ vremennykh let”, the Varangian regent for Igor (son of the deceased Rjurik) and was said to have undertaken a military expedition to Constantinople in 907. In the course of this a treaty of commerce was signed, which among other things entailed the obligation for Kievan princes to protect the Byzantine possessions at the northern fringe of the Black Sea. From this a founding myth was formed by Russian historiography, literature and art regarding the Varangian-Slavic relations with Byzantium. Their reception of this founding myth is the subject of this dissertation.

The question will be pursued, why and in which way the armed conflicts between the Varangian-Slavic warrior societies and Byzantium from the 9th to 12th century were depicted in the pictorial and textual culture of the 18th and 19th century. What traits have been attributed to these warrior societies? Are they considered “foreign” or “one’s own”? To answer those questions, sources consisting of Russian historiography, literature and historical painting will be examined.

To better approach this topic, not only will the Varangian-Slavic relations with Byzantium themselves from the 9th to 12th century have to be considered, but also the historical context of the 18th and 19th century in Russia. The 18th century qualifies as a good starting point because of the beginning professionalization of the Russian historiography caused by the foundation of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg in 1725. At the time, a question regarding Russia’s ethnogenesis arose that was caused by an emerging controversy between “Normannism” and “Anti-Normannism” movements both referencing the “Povest’ vremennykh let”. This dispute became a key narrative of Russian historiography, literature and historical painting.

Investigating how Varangian-Slavic societies were represented in the Russian pictorial and textual culture during the 18th and 19th century is an ongoing desideratum in today’s studies. Historical contacts between different cultures, questions regarding one’s own identity as well as the reception and commemorative culture are all important areas of research that could benefit from an intensified engagement with this object of study.

¹ ([https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oleg_\(Kiewer_Rus\)#/media/Datei:Oleg_of_Novgorod.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oleg_(Kiewer_Rus)#/media/Datei:Oleg_of_Novgorod.jpg))