

Reasons for vladimir i's conversion to christianity and how it changed the cultur...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



What Motivated Vladimir I to convert to Christianity and how did the new religion change the culture of Eastern Slavs?

Paganism was a mental mindset of the Eastern Slavs living in a world where a majority of the European countries surrounding them had already converted to a monastic religion. Vladimir I, a great prince of Kiev, reigned from 980 till 1015 and succeeded in the mass conversion of the Eastern Slavs. 1 Throughout his reign Vladimir's agenda had always been to strengthen his empire, in order to be considered valuable among the dominate nations of the European family. 2 The traditional view of Vladimir's motivation for the conversion is that only after considering all monastic faiths, did he finally reach the decision of Eastern Christianity, based on the beauty and wonder of Constantinople. 3 The conversion of Kievan Rus not only led to a change in religion but also a variety of other benefits, which suggests Vladimir was motivated not only by aesthetic reasons, but also political and economic reasons too. The choice of Eastern Christianity had a profound and lasting effect of the Eastern Slav's all over Kievan Rus. The gateway opened by Vladimir and Eastern Christianity allowed the country and its people to expand in various areas of art, architecture and education.

These areas of culture effected and shaped the events in the history of Russia that followed. The Primary Chronicle tells the tale of how a representative of each faith, western Christianity, Judaism and Islam each gave a brief summary of their religion. 4 Vladimir rebuffed each faith because of different factors that would not suit his people. 5 Although the Primary Chronicle is semi-legendary with missing gaps some elements

should be considered, this story illustrates that Vladimir's did understand the value of religion as a force that could bind together the Eastern Slavs and was open to the possibility of different religions, and what they would offer Kievan Rus. 6 This correlates with Vladimir's attempt to restructure the pagan gods into a hierarchy similar to that of the Greek's or Scandinavian's. 7 Vladimir constructed a pantheon with idols on the highest hill in Kiev, instructing people on the new system and how they should now worship. 8 This attempt was unsuccessful as most Slavs just continued to worship their pagan beliefs as they traditionally did, but it is an example of Vladimir's ambitions plans to align Kievan Rus with the rest of the European family.

9 The rejection of his new hierarchy by the Eastern Slavs would have been a contributing factor as to why he then turned his attention to monastic religions as told in the Primary Chronicle. 10 Influence and contacts from the Eastern Roman Empire meant Christianity had long been a familiar aspect of the Eastern Slav's culture. 11 There was probably individual Christians living among them long before Vladimir and his conversion, which is evident in the first Russian diocese of the Byzantium church being established as early as 867. 12 Although Vladimir's conversion was radical the familiarity of Eastern Christianity among the nation would have contributed to his choice of religion. This familiarity is illustrated with his family, Vladimir's grandmother Olga, who after the death of her husband Igor remained regency until her son Sviatoslav was old enough to take the throne. 1

3 Olga accepted Christianity and was baptized on her own accord however her conversion did not lead to a revolution in religion for her country, or her

son, but would have certainly spread understanding and broken down barriers between the two different faiths. 14 By using his family as justification, the familiarity would have also appealed to Vladimir's motivation, understanding the conversion would be understood and more widely accepted than that of other monastic religions at the time. Although Vladimir examined and discussed each religion, western Christianity as well as being familiar, had political, economic and military advantages. Vladimir's ambitions and diplomatic nature is again reflected with The Primary Chronicle confirming that Vladimir sent envoys to make personal enquires about their religious practices. 15 Converting to a monastic religion was Kievan Rus' chance to be adopted into the powerful European family, gain new allies and better trading opportunities. 16 With the history of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Russia, it was probably the most logical choice for Vladimir. 17 Throughout Vladimir's reign he campaigned against many surrounding tribes.

18 His campaigns were carefully structured and executed accordingly. 19 This is illustrated with the Varagians in Kiev itself, and then towards Slavonic and Lithuanian tribes in the north, who he overcame without any difficulty. 20 These political elements of Vladimir correlate with his capture of Chersonesus, belonging to Byzantium, the most powerful and wealthy empire at the time. 21 With this bold move he was able to negotiate with Emperor Basil II, exchanging Basil's sister Anna for his cooperation and assistance. 22 This illustrates that Vladimir realized if he constructed a scheme, rather than simply just being baptized in Constantinople, he could convert and gain a

Byzantium Bride for Kievan Rus at the same time. 23 It also shows how Vladimir understood that Byzantium would never allow such a highly prized object to be married to a pagan, and converting after receiving his bride would not be sufficient. 24 Vladimir first gave proof of his good faith by being baptized, however Basil became reluctant to fill his side of the bargain, and Vladimir again returned to a political plan. 25 Vladimir captured Chersonesus again, illustrating his diplomatic abilities to push the circumstances to his advantage.

26 After the marriage ceremony, Chersonesus was restored and priests from Byzantium accompanied Vladimir and his bride back to Kiev with which the pantheon was destroyed and the mass conversion of the Eastern Slavs begun. 27 The conversion to Christianity although described as rapid and without trouble in The Primary Chronicle, would not have been an easy transition for the Eastern Slav's. 28 The struggle between their traditional pagan rituals and the new monastic religion would have resulted in a double faith or dvoeverie for a period of time after the conversion as the Eastern Slav's slowly incorporated more of the new religion into their lives and let go of their old traditional ways of worship. 29 The link with Byzantium would have also contributed to the strength and independence of the church and its relationship with the people. 30 The conversion also occupied a central position in education, literature and the arts. 31 With Christian culture came the emergence of the Cyrillic alphabet. 32 In order for missionaries to convert the Eastern Slavs, they needed written literature that they could read and understand. 33 Two missionaries from Greece, St Cyril and St

Methodius, conducted missions throughout the region and devised an alphabet known as the Cyrillic alphabet for the Slav's. 34 This alphabet used Greek symbols, but represented the sound of Slavic languages

. 35 The creation of this alphabet enabled the Slaves to not only read biblical doctrine but develop sophisticated traditions of thought and literature. 36 This also stimulated conversation in the community, and the helped the orthodox religion grow more rapidly. 37 As a result translated scripture and ritual helped missionaries explain Christian values and ideas in Slavic terms. 38 This then followed with schools organized by missionaries to ensure Slav's received religious instruction alongside with basic literary. 39 This resulted in a deep Christian influence on the Slavic people's cultural traditions and everyday life. 40 Art and architecture of the Easter Slav's was also effected with the adoption of Christianity, and had a large impact on the landscape of their communities. 41 The immediate result was the destruction of Vladimir's pantheon and hilltop pagan idols, which was replaced with a church on the same site, with more churches to follow all over Kiev. 42 Typically these churches follow their Byzantine models, but also incorporate attributes unique to Russia. 43 This is reflected in their construction, where thicker walls, smaller windows and steep roofs were essential to withstand the harsh climate. 44 This is also evident in the onion domes of early Russian architects used to imitate the domed structures of Constantinople, but altered to cope with the snowfall in Russia. 45 Christianity opened a gateway for Byzantine architects and artistic influence.

It was in this time that icon paintings came to Russia from Byzantium, and eventually became an essential part of worship within the community. 46 An example of this is illustrated in St Sophia, built in 1037, modeled after a church in Constantinople. The interior of the cathedral contains columns of porphyry, marble, mosaics, frescoes and other decoration. 47 These characteristics of St Sophia correlate with other churches throughout the country and illustrate how the influence of Byzantium inspired the people of Kievan Rus⁴⁸ The conversion from traditional paganism to Eastern Christianity represents Vladimir I as a strategic leader who chose the familiar monastic religion for his country in order to strengthen its power by political and economic means.

In using his family connection with Christianity he was able to promote a sense of familiarity and justify the conversion to his people. Vladimir would have understood the political and economic ramifications of his decision, which is illustrated in the strategic way he approached the conversion, the prestigious Byzantium bride he acquired and the increased trade that followed. The choice of religion also indirectly resulted in the emergence of a cultural and social evolution for the Eastern Slav's. The effects of the conversion are also evident in the spread of Christianity around Kievan Rus which led to the development of literacy and the introduction of the first alphabet. A result of the increased literacy was education through the new religion, following this the beginnings of schools. The influence of art had an impact on icon painting's and religious decoration. Byzantium architecture also flourished making a profound change in the landscape of Kievan Rus.