The Future in the Past: Predictions in the Old Rus’ Chronicles

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The article deals with predictions of the future in the Old Rus’ chronicles. From the point of view of the chroniclers, Christian saints and other godly persons had the divine gift of knowing future events. By contrast, predictions by their enemies were always wrong because God resisted their prophecies. Only an enemy who converted to Orthodoxy could have the gift of prophecy. Yet surprisingly, according to the chroniclers, pagan priests and princes were able to predict the future. Medieval chroniclers repeatedly addressed this issue of foretelling, and they questioned why non-Christians had such a gift. The chroniclers attributed this fact to God’s will, to the desire to tempt people and to demonic possession. Pagans could not only be aware of impending death, but also could try to avoid it. Chroniclers understood the future as already existing; nevertheless, knowledge of it could help avoid unwonted accidents. Images of pagans with magic gifts, including the ability to predict the future, might demonstrate the chroniclers’ religious dualism.

In its entry for the year 1071, the Primary Chronicle of Kiev states that a magician appeared in Novgorod. He pretended to be a god, deceiving many people and claiming that he knew beforehand everything that would happen. Prince Gleb hid an axe under his coat, came to the magician and asked: ‘Do you know what is going to happen tomorrow and this evening?’ The magician replied that he knew everything. Then Gleb said: ‘Do you know what will happen to you today?’ The magician replied that he would perform great miracles. Then Prince Gleb took the axe and killed him. The chronicler concluded that the magician’s soul had surrendered to the Devil.¹ This chronicle episode is fundamentally important for an understanding of the problem of predicting the future.

¹ PVL 6579 (1071) in Likhachev 1950, 120–121.
The ability to look beyond available knowledge based on the observation of natural processes, to divine one’s fate and to foretell coming events was considered one of the main functions of magicians everywhere, particularly in Medieval Europe. Those who knew the future could manage forthcoming events. The religious dispute between Christians and pagans was mainly centred on the possibility of predicting the future.

There are different kinds of prognostic texts in the Old Rus’ chronicles. They include direct predictions, such as warnings to the princes, and indirect predictions, which require interpretation; these include prophetic dreams and visions, signs and omens, and allegorical magic texts. The texts on predicting the future are represented by forecasts, prophecies and fortune telling. Forecasts are based on an analysis of a situation; prophecies are based on a mystical, extrasensory experience, while fortune telling is based on folk omens, traditional lore, astrology, heavenly signs and divinations. Both Christians and pagans (magicians, ‘prophetic’ persons in general, including princes) could know and predict the future.

The Bible quotations, allusions and scriptural references were important in predictions of the future made by Christians. At the very beginning of the Primary Chronicle we read about Apostle Andrew’s coming to Rus’. While travelling on the river Dniepr, Andrew told his disciples that God’s favour would shine down and a great city would arise on the hills above the shore, where God would erect many churches. Andrew climbed the hills and blessed them. After he had set up a cross and offered his prayer to God, he descended to the place where Kiev was later built, then continued his journey up the Dniepr.

The story of the prophecy of the Apostle Andrew became the model for subsequent chronicle texts about the Christian anticipation of the future.

In the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle in the entry for the year 1276, there is a description of how Prince Vladimir Vladimirovich decided to found a new town. He took the Bible and opened it at random and found the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations’ (Isaiah 61:4). Prince Vladimir understood this prophecy as a sign of God’s mercy and sent a skilful man named Alexa to find a suitable place to build the town. When Alexa found a place on the bank of the river Losna, he returned to tell the prince. The prince liked the site, cleared it and founded the town, which he named Kamenets. This land had been empty for eighty years, and the Lord in His mercy had now restored it.

3 PVL in Likhachev 1950, 12.
4 Ipat’evskaya letopis’ 6784 (1276), 557–578.
Just as the Apostle Andrew had predicted the appearance of Kiev, Prince Vladimir used the Bible to foresee the foundation of his town.

We should also mention here two stories about the monks of the Kievan Caves Monastery, both from the *Primary Chronicle of Kiev*. The entry for the year 1074 tells that the monk Jeremiah had a God-given gift to predict the future. If any monk was planning to leave the monastery, Jeremiah would know in advance and would reveal the monk's intentions. Whether he predicted something good or bad, it came to pass, just as he foretold.\(^5\) In the *Primary Chronicle* account for the year 1091, a woman named Maria asks Abbot Theodosius: 'Who knows where I’ll be buried?' Theodosius replies: ‘Verily, where I will lie, there you will be buried.’ The abbot died first, and when Maria passed away eighteen years later, the ‘prophecy’ of Theodosius came true: the two were buried in the same church.\(^6\) A similar story is told in the *Hypatian Chronicle* in the entry for the year 1156, when Novgorod Bishop Niphont had a prophetic dream while in Kiev. In his vision the same holy abbot Theodosius from the Kievan Caves Monastery appeared to him and said: ‘Good of you to come, brother and son Niphont! Now we will be inseparable.’ This prediction of Theodosius was also fulfilled, as Niphont soon became sick and died, and was buried in the Caves Monastery.\(^7\)

Knowledge of the time of death and the place of burial is typical of many Christian saints. For example, the fifteenth-century holy monk Michael Klopsky from Novgorod the Great was one who possessed such prophetic knowledge. As told in his *Vita*, Michael knew the circumstances of his own death and also forewarned Prince Dmitry Shemyaka that the prince would be murdered at the hands of his brethren, saying to the prince three times: ‘Prince, the ground cries out’.\(^8\) This was a reference to the biblical story of Abel’s death at the hands of his brother Cain: ‘The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground’ (Genesis 4:10). Prince Dmitry Shemyaka was indeed poisoned by his cousin and died in 1453. Saint Michael Klopsky’s mystical knowledge of the prince’s approaching death is reminiscent of predictions of fate in the Russian chronicles. The knowledge of the saints and other devout people concerning future events was not surprising to the chroniclers. The apostles and saints knew about future events as if they already existed, and therefore their predictions always came true. According to Dmitry Likhachev, the chroniclers wrote about past events as being ‘in the front’ and wrote about events taking place later – in the present, in the future or in the end times – as being ‘in

\(^{5}\) PVL 6582 (1074), in Likhachev 1950, 126.
\(^{6}\) PVL 6599 (1091), in Likhachev 1950, 139–140.
\(^{7}\) Ipat’evskaya letopis’ 6664 (1156), 332.
\(^{8}\) Dmitriev 1958, 96.
the back’. So they used a kind of ‘inverse perspective’ and believed that knowledge of the future meant that the fate of every individual was known and had been predetermined from the Creation.

An unfulfilled prophecy is a punishment for pride or arrogance. We can see an example in the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle in the entry for the year 1217. The chronicler described how the Hungarian military commander Philney (“Philya Once Haughty”) came to Rus’ with many Hungarians, intending ‘to seize the land, to drain the sea’. Philney made two allegorical predictions: ‘One stone breaks many pots’ and ‘A sharp sword and a gallant horse will capture a lot of Rus’!’ But God did not tolerate this, and Philya was later killed by Prince Daniel Romanovich. According to the chronicler, an impious prophecy that is not pleasing to God has no chance of being fulfilled. Another example of an unfulfilled prophecy is described in the same Galician-Volhynian Chronicle for the year 1229. The Hungarian king Bela IV declared: ‘The town of Galich cannot stand against me. No one will save them from my hand!’ Yet he was soon defeated. Thus, in the chronicles the enemy is generally presented as arrogant and does not really know the future. An exception to this tendency is found in the early fifteenth-century story called the ‘Testament of Magnush’, which appears in a number of Old Rus’ chronicles in the year 1352. Here the Swedish king Magnus Eriksson urged his descendants not to violate the eternal peace treaty with future attacks on Rus’. He described his own misery at this prospect and predicted that God would punish his people for violating their oath to the Cross. Such a prediction in the mouth of the enemy is explained by the fact that, according to the ‘Testament’, Magnus became a monk in an Orthodox monastery before his death. John H. Lind believes that, even if the ‘Testament’ was not initially intended as a hagiographical text, it at least assumed this function. The prophecy of King Magnus is thus based on the knowledge of the future inherent in him as an Orthodox monk, whereas predictions by enemy figures were always wrong. While this seems natural in the case of Magnus, it is surprising that in the chronicles the Christians are not the only ones able to predict the future.

The prediction of the future made by pagans and representatives of other religions is a problem that needs clarification. The chroniclers addressed this issue repeatedly, raising the question of why non-Christians had the gift of knowing the future. They came up with three hypotheses: first, God allows non-Christians to know the future; second, this gift to non-believers is a way of tempting and testing the fortress of faith; and third, such individuals are obsessed by the Devil.

9 Likhachev 1979, 254–255.
10 Ipat’evskaya letopis’ 6725 (1217), 492–494, 533–534.
11 Ipat’evskaya letopis’ 6737 (1229), 507–508.
13 Lind 2001, 212.
Sometimes non-Christians predicted the future against their will, without knowing what they were saying. Such a prediction was made by the Khazar Elders in the *Primary Chronicle*. When the people of Old Rus’ paid tribute to the Khazars – ‘one sword per hearth’ – their elders predicted: ‘This tribute is evil. We have won it with a single-edged weapon called a sabre, but the weapon of these men is sharp on both edges and is called a sword. These men shall impose tribute upon us and upon other lands.’ And later their prediction came to pass, for ‘they spoke not of their own will, but by God’s commandment.’

This explanation finds justification in the Bible itself, which provides examples of pagan prophecy, so it would have been impossible for Christians to deny such power to pagans. Also in the apocrypha, such as *The Tale of Afroditian*, we find the same attitude to predictions: through God’s will, the birth of Christ was foretold by the ancient gods.

Another problem for the chroniclers was that the pagan princes and magicians could predict death. The entry for the year 907 in the *Primary Chronicle* relates a tale about the siege of Constantinople by Prince Oleg the Seer. The Greeks brought him food and wine, but he did not accept these gifts for he knew that they had been poisoned. The Greeks were frightened and said: ‘This is not Oleg, but Saint Dmitry sent upon us from God.’

Researchers are still unable to explain why the Greeks decided that Prince Oleg was Saint Dmitry (i.e. Demetrius of Thessalonica). Several explanations have been proposed. First, it has been suggested that Saint Dmitry was simply an addition made by the chronicler because the cult of Saint Dmitry was popular in the Rurikid dynasty in the eleventh century. Other scholars have stressed the warrior features of Saint Dmitry, who in one of his posthumous miracles helped to protect the city of Thessalonica from enemy attack and is often depicted in a way reminiscent of Saint George the Warrior. This could have led to the identification of Oleg with Saint Dmitry, as Oleg had come to Constantinople as a warrior.

However, scholars have still not paid attention to one important detail in Saint Dmitry’s biography, which can better explain the identification with Oleg. The *Life of Saint Dmitry* relates that while Dmitry was imprisoned, a snake crawled under his feet and was ready to strike. Saint Dmitry made the sign of the Cross over the snake and spat, killing it. A later entry in the *Primary Chronicle* shows the significance of the snake episode for understanding the image of Prince Oleg the Seer. According to the chronicle entry for the year 912, a pagan magician predicted Oleg’s death: ‘Prince, your beloved horse,
the one you ride, will cause your death.’ Oleg decided never to mount that horse again or even to look at it, and he sent the horse away. Many years later, Oleg asked where his old horse was and learned that it was dead. Oleg mocked the magicians, exclaiming: ‘They did not speak the truth. Everything was a lie. The horse is dead, and I am still alive.’ Then he asked to see the horse’s remains and was taken to the place where the bare bones lay. When he stepped on the horse’s skull, a snake slithered from the skull and bit him. Oleg fell sick and died, and thus the prophecy was fulfilled.\textsuperscript{21}

The motif of being threatened with death by a snake unites Oleg with Saint Dmitry. The chronicler placed the identification of the two in the mouths of Greeks, as he already knew the legend of Oleg’s death by snake bite. By rejecting the poisoned food and wine, Oleg managed to escape death, as Saint Dmitry had done earlier. Many years later it was the snake bite that turned out to be fatal to the prince of Rus’. Oleg, who was called ‘The Seer’ for his wisdom and knowledge of the future, managed to avoid the poison in the food and wine, but the poison of the snake still killed him. The chronicler concluded the story of Oleg’s death by saying: ‘No wonder that the ritual magic comes true.’ He gave a number of examples of ancient magicians and sorcerers and came to the conclusion that many pagans, including those who lived before the coming of Christ, worked miracles and predicted the future not by their own will, but by God’s command.\textsuperscript{22}

Princess Olga also possessed the gift of prophecy, while her enemies did not. In an entry for the year 945 the \textit{Primary Chronicle} describes how Princess Olga wreaked her revenge upon the ambassadors of the Drevlyane tribe for the death of her husband, Prince Igor. When the prince of the Drevlyane, Mal, sent his matchmakers to the widowed princess, Olga presented the ambassadors with three peculiar ‘riddles’ to solve that were both prophetic and strategic. First, she ordered her men to carry the Drevlyane in a boat over land, then prepare a steam bath for them and last arrange a feast for them.\textsuperscript{23} It turned out that the matchmakers did not foresee their future, as each of these rituals involved death. They did not realise that the boat, the bath and the feast were not wedding rituals, but funeral and burial rites.

According to the fifteenth-century version of the \textit{Pereyaslavl Suzdal Chronicle}, Prince Mal was warned in a dream about the tragic outcome of his ambassadorship, but he did not understand the prediction. He dreamt that he came to Olga and she gave him ‘precious purple clothes decorated with pearls, and a black blanket with green ornaments, and a tarred boat, in which they had to be carried’.\textsuperscript{24}

Dmitry Likhachev compared Prince Mal’s dream with the dream of Prince Svyatoslav in the \textit{Tale of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnoteref{21} PVL 6420 (912) in Likhachev 1950, 29–30.
\footnoteref{22} PVL 6420 (912) in Likhachev 1950, 30–31.
\footnoteref{23} PVL 6453 (945) in Likhachev 1950, 40–42.
\footnoteref{24} Letopisets Pereslavlya Suzdal’skogo 6453 (945) in PSRL 1985, 15.
\end{footnotes}
Igor’s Campaign. Likhachev believed that both magic dreams had common folk and ethnological roots.\textsuperscript{25} Svyatoslav dreamt about a sledge that was carried to the ‘blue sea’.\textsuperscript{26} This dream was a mystic sign of Prince Igor’s defeat and of the rout of his troops near the sea. Boats and sledges were used in Old Rus’ pagan funeral rites to carry the dead body. In the tale of Olga’s revenge, the ambassadors of Prince Mal were carried in a boat and dropped into a deep pit, which became their grave. The ambassadors had thought that they were being honoured, but in fact they were being buried. Princess Olga’s second revenge was based on the magic actions carried out in the bathhouse. In the tradition of Old Rus’ a bathhouse was a home temple where fortune telling, wedding rituals and funeral customs were performed. A bathhouse ceremony called mov’ was known from earliest times; there is evidence of the ritual from medieval sources. Widespread in the northern part of the Old Rus’ and carried out in steam bathhouses with the use of special plants, mov’ was a pagan ritual that enabled participants to contact the world of the spirits and the dead.\textsuperscript{27} Olga deceived the matchmakers by superimposing a mock wedding ceremony on a funeral ritual. The Drevlyane were warned of their deaths by Princess Olga’s ‘riddles’ and Prince Mal’s prophetic dream, but they did not understand the meaning of the predictions.

In the \textit{Primary Chronicle of Kiev} and the \textit{Tale of Igor’s Campaign} there is another prince with magic abilities. In the year 1044 the chronicle mentions that Prince Vseslav of Polotsk, also known as Vseslav the Sorcerer, was born through magic (\textit{ot volkhovovaniya}).\textsuperscript{28} In the \textit{Tale of Igor’s Campaign} and in Russian epic songs, Vseslav is depicted as a werewolf.\textsuperscript{29} A number of supernatural events and predictions are connected with this prince in the Russian chronicles. In the year 1063 the currents of the river Volkhov in Novgorod changed direction for five days, which was considered an evil sign by the chronicler, as four years later Vseslav burned down the city.\textsuperscript{30} The beginning of the war instigated by Prince Vseslav in the year 1065 was accompanied by a sign in the west, a giant star with bloody rays. This phenomenon was seen as an ominous portent of the many internecine wars and invasions that followed its appearance.\textsuperscript{31}

A particular question in the chronicles is the possibility of avoiding undesirable future events. Oleg the Seer was a wise prince and did his best to evade the death predicted for him, but nothing could help. Yet sometimes people could hope to influence their fate, for example, by avoiding events that were considered bad omens, such as encountering a pig (the modern equivalent is a black cat). In the

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\item[25] Likhachev 1985, 288–292.
\item[26] Tale of Igor’s Campaign in Mann 2005, 43. This is a reconstruction of a problematic passage.
\item[27] Bobrov 2009, 68–75, 79.
\item[28] PVL 6552 (1044) in Likhachev 1950, 104.
\item[31] PVL 6573 (1065), in Likhachev 1950, 110.
\end{thebibliography}
year 1068 in the *Primary Chronicle*, the author condemns the popular habits of his contemporaries, asking: ‘Do we not live in a pagan way if we believe that some meetings are bad omens? If someone meets a monk, he turns back, the same as we do if we meet a wild boar or a pig. Isn’t this pagan?’ The chroniclers didn’t tell stories in which such avoidance helped fend off any kind of predicted outcome. That is important to note, especially as the very idea that people could evade their fates undermines the general belief of the chroniclers that the future has already been written.

The chronicles frequently mention predictions of the future by common people. The most detailed discussion of pagan predictions can be found in the entry for the year 1071 in the *Primary Chronicle*. The chronicler tells that a magician in Kiev predicted that in five years the Dniepr River would flow backwards and countries would start to move. The Greek Land would take the place of the Rus’ Land, and the Rus’ Land would be on the site of Byzantine Greece, while other lands would also move. The common people listened to him, but the religious laughed, saying: ‘The Devil plays with you and leads you to death.’ The Christian prediction came true when one night the magician disappeared. Another story tells of two magicians from Yaroslavl who came to the Rostov region during a famine and claimed that they knew who was hiding the food reserves. They were arrested on the order of the prince and, after a lengthy religious dispute, were executed. In a third tale the chronicler tells about a Novgorodian who came to the land of the Chud’ to ask a magician for a divination. First, the magician was speechless, but suddenly a devil began to shake him. The magician stood up and explained that his gods were unable to come inside the house because of a cross that the guest wore around his neck. When the Novgorodian took off his cross and placed it outside the house, the magician began to conjure again. Then, according to the chronicler, the demons told the Novgorodian everything he wanted to know. Both here and in other entries (such as for the years 1102, 1113 and elsewhere) the chronicler discusses why demons tempt and seduce people by giving them different visions while they sleep or daydream. These visions, as well as heavenly signs, can lead ‘some to evil, and others to good,’ concluded the chronicler. Seeing these signs, the pious pray to God in order to improve the future.

The most significant aspect of the predictions in the chronicles of Old Rus’ is that the future was believed to exist already, yet one could also try to avoid or improve it. Christian saints and holy people could foresee the future if they were carrying out God’s will. Proud and arrogant enemies typically

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32 PVL 6576 (1068), in Likhachev 1950, 114.
33 PVL 6579 (1071), in Likhachev 1950, 116–121.
34 PVL 6579 (1071), in Likhachev 1950, 116–117.
36 PVL 6579 (1071), in Likhachev 1950, 119.
37 PVL 6610 (1102), in Likhachev 1950, 183.
predicted the future incorrectly. At the same time, pagans and representatives of other religions could also predict the future. This is probably a trait of religious dualism (syncretism, double belief, *dvoeverie*) inherent in all world religions. Such a mix of elements of different confessions in Old Rus’ has been understood as the ‘paganisation’ of Christianity or the ‘Christianisation’ of paganism. This process was based on the conjunction and duplication of Orthodox and folk beliefs.

The concept of *dvoeverie* has been strongly criticised by Eve Levin and later by Stella Rock, who considered it ‘a historiographical construct that developed in the nineteenth century.’ For both scholars the phenomenon of *dvoeverie* does not mean a mixing of faiths, but rather conscious and deliberate adherence to paganism and Christianity simultaneously by the same person. These scholars’ objections to the traditional concept of *dvoeverie* are serious, but what can we say about the Novgorodian who came to the magician for a divination wearing a cross around his neck? If it is not *dvoeverie*, what is it? We can also take into account the pagan rites in the steam baths, which duplicate the Christian sacraments of baptism, chrismation, holy orders and matrimony, as well as pagan predictions of the future in the Old Rus’ chronicles. Although the chroniclers explained pagan knowledge of the future entirely in Christian terms, they admitted that not only the Christians, but also the magicians of Old Rus’ had genuine prophetic power, could know the future and were able to predict it correctly, to see ‘the future in the past’.

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