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# Medieval Sourcebook: The Chronicle of Nestor

*[from Walsh] The earliest written records of Rus seem to date from the 11th century. The most authoritative, complete and earliest of the Chronicles to have survived is The Lavrentyesky Spisok, dating from 1377 and so called after the Monk Lawrence who copied it, The second oldest is called Ipatsky Spisok, after the Ipatsky Monastery where it was found. The main part of both these Chronicles is an historical compilation, "The Tale of Bygone Years" which was long thought to be the work of the Monk Nestor and was known as The Chronicle of Nestor. It is now generally held to be a compilation of the work of many men.*

THE BEGINNINGS. Let us begin our story. After the flood the three children of Noah: Sem, Cham, and Japhat divided the world among them. Sem occupied the East: Cham, the middle part; and Japhat received the North and the Southwest. In the portion belonging to Japhat there lived the Russian, the Chuder,, and many other people.

After the fall of the tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues, the sons of Japhat occupied the countries of the West and North. From the descendants of Japhat came those who took the name of Slavs. They established themselves near the Danube in the countries of the Egri and the Bulgars. Some of these Slavs were scattered over the earth, and they have taken the names of those places where they established themselves, for example, those who populated the frontiers of Moravia call themselves Moravians; others, Czechs. The Serbs and the Kroats are also Slavs. Among those Slavs who lived along the Dnieper, some took the name of Poles, others that of Dreviliens (because they lived in the forest) others that of Dregovich (who established themselves between the Pripet and the Dvina) thus the language of the Slavs was dispersed. As to the alphabet, that was not born until later.

THE ANCIENT ROAD. There is a road which runs from Varangia to Greece, and another which goes from Greece to the Lovat; and one which returns from the Lovat by a route across the Great Lake Ilmen. From this [inland] sea flows the Volkhov which enters into the great lake of the Neva. The Neva empties into the Sea of the Varangians [the Baltic]. From this sea one can go to Rome and from Rome, also by sea, even to Constantinople. From Constantinople, one can go by way of the Black Sea into which flows the River Dnieper. The Dnieper rises in the forests of Volkhov and flows to the south; while the Dvina which has its source in the same forests flows to the north and empties into the Varangian Sea; from these same forests, the Volga flows to the west. From this sea one can go from Russia to Bulgaria by way of the Volga; to Varangia by way of the Dvina; from the Varangians to Rome, and from Rome to the farthest possessions of Chain. The Dnieper with its three mouths empties into the Black Sea, which is called the Sea of the Russians.

THE THREE PRINCES. During the years 6386, 6369, and 6370, [from 860-862] the Varangians crossed the Sea. This time the people who had already submitted to them refused to pay them tribute longer, and wished to govern themselves, but there was no sense of justice among them. One family raised itself against the others, and this foolishness brought frequent disaster. They therefore decided among themselves, "Let us seek a Prince who will govern us and who will give us justice." In order to find him, the Slavs crossed the Sea and sought him among the Varangians. The Chudes, the Slavs, the Krivichs and other peoples together spoke thus to the princes of Varangia: "Our country is large and has everything in abundance except that we lack order and justice; come take possession and govern us." Three Varangian brothers together with their families went, in effect, to occupy Slavonia. They settled among the Slavs, and in the country they built the city of Ladoga. The eldest of the three, Rurik, set up his residence along the banks of the river of that name. The second, Sineous, set up his house in the regions of the Blanc. The third, Trouvor, at Isbosk. That part of Russia was later called Novgorod by the Varangians, but the residents of that country, before the arrival of Rurik, had been known only by the name of Slavs.

There were among the Varangians, two men, Askold and Dir, who were not of the royal family but were important nobles. Without the King's permission, they left with some of their companions and went into the countryside and penetrated along the Dnieper even to Constantinople. Along the way they discovered a city situated on a mountain and they asked, "Whose city is that?" The response was made, "It belonged once to three brothers, Kii, Shchechek, and Choriv, who built it, but actually we who live there pay tribute to the Khazars." Askold and Dir then conquered the city and established themselves there, attracting to them a large number of the Varangians.

THE YEAR 6496 [988]. *The Grand Prince Vladimir having, according to the ancient chroniclers, studied all sorts of religions, determined upon the adoption of Christianity. He was perhaps helped to this decision by his desire to marry a Greek princess who made his baptism a prerequisite. After his baptism, he imposed similar baptism upon his people. The words of the Chronicle follow.*

Vladimir made known throughout his village: "Those who day after tomorrow do not appear on the bank of the river, rich or poor, will be considered as rebels and traitors." The day following Vladimir accompanied by the priests, those of the empress and those of Kherson, went to the Dnieper, where there was gathered an innumerable crowd of men who entered into the water, some up to the neck, others only to the chest. The children stayed on the bank and were covered with water; some plunged into the river. Others swam here and there while the priests read their prayers. And this formed a spectacle tremendously curious and beautiful to see. At last, when all the people were baptized, each returned to his home.

THE YEAR 6534 [1026]. Yaroslav after having rebuilt his army approached Kiev and concluded a peace with his brother Mstislav. They divided the Russian territory along the Danube river. Yaroslav took the Western part, and Mstislav the rest. The two princes, reconciled, then dwelt in peace and brotherly friendship. The civil wars and internal rebellions were stopped, and the country knew a rebirth of tranquility.

THE YEAR 6535 [1027]. The third son of Yaroslav was born, and received the name Sviatoslav. The year following there was seen in the sky an extraordinary sign: it was the figure of a serpent, and this sign was noticed by all the world.

THE YEAR 6537 [1029]. General tranquility.

The above excerpts are free translations, somewhat adapted, from an early, uncorrected version. The source is: Louis Paris, La Chronique de Nestor. Traduite en francais d'apres 1'edition imperials de Petersbourg, manuscrit de Koenigsberg. *Paris, 1834.*, trans in Warren Walsh, *Readings in Russian History*, (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1948)

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