

Ritual as an Amalgam of Allegiance: Spirituality and Death in Early Kievan Rus'

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Although Vladimir instituted Christianity as the official religion in 988, several belief systems co-existed in Rus' during the Kievan period. Practices of pre-existing Slavic paganism as well as the influence of Viking (Varangian) religion accompanied the adoption of Christianity, creating a confluence of spiritual beliefs. Certain aspects of paganism and Viking religious traditions are apparent in religious texts from Kievan Rus', and the presence of Varangian references confirms the mixing of belief systems. Slavic paganism and the Viking system of gods also shared many commonalities, which facilitated an intermingling of the two traditions. In addition, both can be viewed in the context of early Christianity—a Christianity that diverges greatly from its subsequent form. Death provides a useful frame with which to compare Slavic paganism, Viking beliefs, and early Christianity, since it played a vital role in all three traditions and also acts as a fecund source of archaeological and textual evidence from this time period.

The Kievan Crypt Paterikon, a collection of monastic writings from Kievan Rus', is particularly helpful in illuminating the co-existence of Varangian practices and early Christian traditions. Its frequent narration of burial practices also contributes to an analysis of death as a tool of religious practice. Death, as the counterpoint to life, plays a central role in ritual theory. As the ritual theorist Mircea Eliade notes, ritual functions as an endless repetition of the original creation of life (199). The life cycles of birth and death figure prominently into the implementation of ritual practices. Religion itself is closely bound to ritual; the safekeeping of the soul—the ultimate promise that such belief awards—centers upon notions of life and death, and many subscribe to religious beliefs in order to be assured a “good” death. Yet ritual theorists with a sociological approach, such as Emile Durkheim, would argue that religion exists for the preservation of society rather than spiritual health (xxxv). Others, such as the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, claim that religion stems from individ-

ual experience rather than a social phenomenon, with the fear of death as the central impetus behind belief (47). Whatever role religion ultimately plays, it is clear that ritual and religion are inseparable concepts, and death serves as an element of religion that concentrates ritualistic actions. The performative and public aspect of burial customs substantiates the argument for religion as a societal tool rather than an individualized instrument, and this type of function for death is clearly evident in the three belief systems discussed here.

Even though the population of Kievan Rus' enthusiastically embraced Christianity, conversion was a slow process; some scholars claim that the peasants' full adoption of the religion occurred only as late as the fifteenth century (Fedotov 8).¹ Conversion did not destroy previous belief systems such as Slavic paganism, but rather transformed them (3). Through this process, elements of Slavic paganism were incorporated into early Christianity rather than being completely disavowed. With no fixed neighbors, no natural frontiers, and continuously changing borders, early Slavs mingled frequently and easily with new populations (4). These characteristics of Kievan Rus' allowed for a presence of Viking beliefs, and the economic predominance of Varangians created visible traces of their influence in the area's history and spirituality. Finally, Christianity itself was in a period of flux and development in the Viking Age (DuBois 33), and its lack of a strict doctrine created an atmosphere conducive to a continued espousal of other traditions.

There are many similarities between Viking religion and Slavic paganism, perhaps allowing the inhabitants of Kievan Rus' to identify easily with the traditions of the Norsemen who appeared in the middle of the eighth century. Even before the arrival of the Slavs, Finnish tribes occupied the steppes (Fedotov 4) and may have been responsible for the name "Rus" itself (Davidson *Viking* 57). Rurik, the founder of Rus', was a Norseman, and Varangians held many important political posts in the Kievan principality. While the historical impact of these Viking occupiers is clear, the commonalities between their belief systems and Slavic paganism is frequently overlooked. Just as pagan Slavs had a tree cult and worshipped house and forest deities (Pascal 8), so do the Varangians create localized deities who dwell in particular objects and places, even under floorboards (DuBois 50), similarly to the *domovoi* in Slavic folk beliefs. Animals were worshipped in both traditions, with the bear playing a vital role in each (DuBois 48; Fedotov 9). The *volkovi*, or heathen magicians in Slavic

paganism, were likely developed from Finnish shamanistic traditions, especially since all mentions of these magicians come from the north, where Slavs lived side by side with Varangians (356).

The primary god in Slavic paganism, Perun, also shares some features with Viking religion. This god was the most important object of worship before the adoption of Christianity, and the breaking of his wooden idols marked the introduction of Christianity into Kievan Rus' (Fedotov 15). The reconfiguration of Perun as an important warrior god may have been drawn from the Viking god Thor (15). The militaristic nature of Perun, a phenomenon that had no precedent in Slavic paganism, could very plausibly have been refashioned after the warrior-like Viking gods (342). Thor and Perun do share many qualities—with their facial hair, association with lightning, and warring natures they are likely complements of one another. Despite the destruction of the idols of Perun, the god continues to be worshipped in small villages and towns (Rybakov 21), and his popularity is perhaps the greatest among all pagan Slavic deities.

Although some of the commonalities between Viking religion and Slavic paganism are mere coincidence, the pre-existing similarities between the two systems would have made the adoption of Viking traditions occur more easily. Crucial changes in burial practices, as well as the adoption of Perun as a military god, confirm the adaptation of Varangian beliefs to Kievan Christianity. Death—in addition to the importance of tree-worship, animal veneration, and rock magic—plays an essential role in both Viking religion and Slavic paganism. Odinn, the most important god of the Vikings, is a god of the dead, and funerary customs held an especially privileged function in the religion. In Slavic paganism, the feasts of the dead were perhaps the most frequent celebrations, with ten Saturdays a year devoted to worship of the deceased (Fedotov 16). The dead actually became minor deities in Slavic paganism (Fedotov 17), and worship of the deceased was a central part of their practices.

Pagan Slavs also practiced cremation of corpses (Rybakov 282), similar to the firm espousal of cremation by Viking migrants in the area.² Indeed, cremation is one way in which the Varangians attest to the superiority of their funerary customs; as one Varangian noted to a traveler: “You take the people you most love and honor and throw them in the ground and the earth and creeping creatures and growing things destroy them. We, on the other hand, burn them in an instant, so that they may go to Paradise in that very hour” (qtd. Du-

Bois 70). The fact that pagan Slavs also practiced cremation—as opposed to the funerary customs that would later develop under Christianity—brings the burial practices of early Slavs and Varangians closer together. In comparing Viking and early Christian funerary traditions, it becomes clear that the particular custom espoused is important not only for the saving of the individual soul but also for the continuation of society. The societal function of burial customs confirms its ritual nature and indicates that religion helps to construct the very image society has of itself; after all, the Varangian traveler is shocked by Christian burial practices not so much because he is concerned about the individual's soul, but rather because he would like to posit his society's tradition as the more sensible alternative.

The Viking god Odinn demands particular attention, since this deity helps to shed light on Slavic paganism and Viking religion within the context of early Christianity. As the head of the Viking gods, Odinn lends a monotheistic quality to Viking religion and can be interpreted as an almost Christ-like figure (Turville-Petre 35). Odinn is the first god to live and die on earth, and the only god to live “until the end of time” (Dumezil 26). He is the father of the predominant god Thor as well as of many other Viking deities (Turville-Petre 35). Most importantly, he is the creator of mankind itself; Odinn is said to have fashioned man and woman out of two tree trunks on a beach. The thirteenth century Norse author Snorri notes of the god: “But the greatest is this, that he created man and gave him the spirit which shall live and never perish, even though the body rot to soil or burn to ashes” (qtd. Turville-Petre 35). It is interesting, although perhaps not surprising, that Snorri endows Odinn with this life-giving power while also mentioning death. Odinn is a god of the dead, and he acquires his magical abilities by undergoing a symbolic death and returning to life (Davidson 145). His animal is the raven, a bird associated with corpses, and he gives them the ability to communicate so that they can act as his servants (Dumezil 28). Those who are fortunate enough to die a glorious death join Odinn in the warrior paradise of Valhalla (Davidson 48).

The tale of Odinn's death in particular serves as an interesting counterpart to Christianity. Similarly to Christ, Odinn was crucified on a tree where he hung for nine days and was fed vinegar and pierced with a spear. The tree that Christ died upon had no roots, and Odinn's tree rose from “unknown roots” (Turville-Petre 43). The world-tree, a central image in Viking religion and the tree from which

Odinn hung, also has similarities to the Christian cross, which was “believed to stand at the mid-point of the earth when it was raised at Cavalry, at the spot once occupied by the fatal tree of Eden” (Davidson 196). Although crucifixion was a common occurrence during this time period, it is significant that both Christ and Odinn are committing the ultimate sacrifice while being punished for their sins. Christ makes his sacrifice in order to save humankind, whereas Odinn undergoes a voluntary death in order to gain access to the secrets of the underworld. In addition, both figures return from the dead through a miraculous resurrection. While it is impossible to say if the myth was a direct result of Christian influence, especially since most elements of the tale can be viewed in the context of Viking traditions, the textual similarities are worth mentioning. The fact that Odinn surfaced as a predominant god much later in the course of Viking religion (Dumezil 31) perhaps means that his sudden and intense development was due to outside sources. In addition, the sheer diversity of his domains implies that he underwent significant growth (Dumezil 34). The appearance of Odinn also created a certain competition among Viking gods, eventually leading to their consolidation (DuBois 59), and this phenomenon lends a monotheistic quality to the previous panoply of Viking gods.

While Odinn certainly demonstrates some monotheistic and even Christ-like attributes, he also retains qualities similar to the gods of Slavic paganism. His close association with animals and uncanny ability to transform himself into various creatures is certainly more pagan than Christian. Odinn also drinks mead and engages in fits of drunken revelry (Turville-Petre 37), similar to Slavic pagan feasts in which alcohol plays a key role. Like the *volkbvi*, Odinn is truly a magician, and often a very sinister one. He is a turbulent, violent character who would be associated more with the militaristic gods of Perun and Thor rather than a kenotic version of Christ. His very name means fury, excitement, and drunkenness (Dumezil 34), qualities that share more features with paganism than Christianity. Yet it is precisely this adaptability, and the ability to interpret him within two belief systems, which underscores the sharing of features by Slavic paganism, Viking religion, and early Christianity.

Just as the Viking religion often blended with Christianity, so did Slavic paganism act as a complement to the newly converted Kievan Rus'. The stubborn presence of pagan rituals was clearly a threat to the adoption of Christianity, once again underlying the im-

portant societal function of ritual. This is evident in sermons directed against paganism in which priests are admonished for letting pagan practices go unnoticed or even for participating in them themselves (Fedotov 360). The fact that priests were not only ignoring pagan rituals around them, but actually took part in the proceedings, indicates that Slavic paganism continued to play an important role in Kievan society after Christianization. In addition, these sermons mention sacrifices made to ancient gods (Fedotov 347); even within religious texts intended to promote the new spirituality there is still evidence of the old. Christians frequently built churches on the sites of former pagan worship (DuBois 44), once again bringing the two systems into close contact even while the former is attempting to eradicate the latter.

The cult of saints is perhaps one of the most interesting contexts in which to view paganism (and even Viking traditions) alongside Christianity, with death as a key component. The cults of some of these saints actually spring from earlier pagan deities rather than Christian figures. For example, Saint Blasius, the protector of cattle, replaced Veles or Volos, the “god of cattle,” just as Saint George showed definite mythological characteristics (Fedotov 358). Myth is also important in the context of ritual, since classicists such as Jane Ellen Harrison believe that ritual serves as a source for myth (viii). Interestingly, the thunder god Perun is another deity that underwent transformation—into the prophet Elijah (Fedotov 357). If Perun was indeed fashioned after the Viking god Thor, he has now undergone a final alteration, encompassing all three belief systems. The cult of saints was intimately connected with death since its true purpose was “to join Heaven and Earth at the grave of a dead human being” (Brown 1). Gravesites became important locales for veneration, and graves were frequently disinterred and moved, with bones and other relics becoming important objects of adoration (4). The burial mound in Viking religion, with its elaborate set of grave goods and particular rituals, also made death a vital presence within life.³ These saints acted as guardian spirits, or the link between the land of the living and the dead, and this function was not so different from the shamanistic abilities of Odinn, the *volkhvi* and Finnish tribes. Nordic countries also experienced the cult of saints: “Christians of the thirteenth century still retained cultural memories of pre-Christian burial rites and beliefs, casting these in the light of continental demonology and saints’ legends” (DuBois 91). The figure of the shaman was

surely a precursor to the saints' abilities to join together heaven and earth.

It is clear that Slavic paganism, Viking religion, and early Christianity in Kievan Rus' share certain features and exhibit a pronounced focus on death. The evidence for the mingling of these belief systems comes not only from general historical sources and practices but is also apparent in texts from this period. In the *Primary Chronicle*, soothsayers foretell Prince Oleg's death, claiming that he will die by his own horse. After his horse passes away, Oleg believes he has the proof that these magicians tell falsehoods—until he steps on the horse's skull and a snake emerges to kill him with a fatal bite. The tale is remarkably similar to a tale of “Odd the Far-travelled,” a man from Halogaland (Davidson *Viking* 129). With a foreboding prophecy, a horse's skull and a fatal bite this Norwegian story is nearly identical to Prince Oleg's, although an adder instead of a snake crawls out of the dead animal's skull. In addition, Vladimir (who is eventually canonized) is presented in the *Primary Chronicle* as a pagan worshipper of Perun as well as an admirer of the Vikings—in fact, the saint was so devoted to the Varangians that many left his service in protest (Davidson *Viking* 162). Other literary texts, such as *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, are full of references to pagan traditions and practices. It is unusual that paganism is so apparent in this late twelfth-century military tale; perhaps Perun's warrior-like nature as well as the brutality of Viking gods made references to paganism particularly relevant.

Although there are many sources of textual evidence for the confluence of religious beliefs in early Rus', the stories in the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon* are especially useful for this task. Perhaps the most important religious work from Kievan Rus', the *Paterikon* sheds light on the nature of early Rus'ian Christianity while also providing colorful, lively narratives. Many of the stories fall into the category of miracle tales, with God playing a key role in magical occurrences. Miracle tales are very important in the early stages of conversion because they help convey God's power and attract more followers (DuBois 64). They also have a fantastic quality that makes them appear to belong more in the realm of fantasy or legend than strict religious doctrine. The *Paterikon* has a demonic, violent quality that sets it apart from later hagiographical works, making it a vital source of evidence regarding the differences between early Christianity and its later development (Fedotov 143).

Death plays a vital role in the *Paterikon*, with some sort of bur-

ial, resurrection, or haunting taking place in nearly every tale. In addition to predominant discussions of death, the monks of the Kievan monastery live in caves that themselves resemble graves. At times, monks will disappear into their cells for a period of years in complete isolation (Discourse 19), and this underground eremitic lifestyle intimates a sort of death on earth. Indeed, the very beginnings of the monastery are built upon the bones of its founders: “So he appointed Barlaam their abbot, and betook himself to the hill, where he dug a grotto, which is under the new monastery, and in which he ended his life” (Zenkovsky 107). Frequently, the occurrence of death is narrated in order to give some sort of lesson about how to live properly.

The first discourse in the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon* deals with the building of the monastery’s church of the Holy Virgin. The building of the church is attributed to Shimon, himself a Viking who is converted to Christianity. Shimon twice has a vision of a great church that is to be built; once when he is at sea in a raging storm and believes he will die, and again when he falls in battle near the river Leta. It is important that both of these visions and near-death experiences happen near bodies of water. The Varangians commonly disposed of their dead by setting them off to sea on funeral pyres (Davidson 154), and so death for the Vikings is intimately linked to the notion of water. In addition to these sacred visions—both of which occur near water and at death’s door—Shimon the Viking is given the plans and measurements for the church of the monastery. When he tells the Abbot Antonius about his divine experiences his name is changed to Simon and the church is built. In this way, the very founding of the church of the Kievan Caves Monastery is due to a Viking, and his name change from Shimon to Simon is symbolic of his rebirth as a Christian believer. This same Simon later goes to the monk Theodosius and asks him to pray for his soul as he would for the monks in the monastery, and with this request Simon is asking to be accepted as a devout Christian rather than as a Viking. Theodosius accepts Simon’s request, and the latter asks the monk to put his agreement in writing.

This written prayer ends up becoming an item that is buried with the dead, and it is noted in the tale that “since that time it has become the custom to put such letters in the coffins of the dead” (Zenkovsky 138). This new tradition is in direct violation of Christian burial beliefs, which adamantly discourage any presence of grave goods since they are reminiscent of pre-Christian conceptions

of afterlife. The development of a negative attitude towards grave goods can also be traced through other early Rus'ian texts. They are still acceptable in the *Tale of the Life and Courage of the Pious and Great Prince Alexander*, written around 1280, since at the end of the tale the dead prince miraculously snatches a charter from the archbishop and pulls it into his coffin (Zenkovsky 236). By the time of Ivan the Terrible, however, it is a horrible sin, as Ivan exclaims to Kurbskii: "You say you want to put your letter in your grave: that shows that you have completely renounced your Christianity!" (Zenkovsky 376). In Viking religion, conversely, the dead are always accompanied by various personal items to take with them on their journey to the afterlife (DuBois 70). The tale of Simon is also put forth as a model conversion story and an example of how pagans can be integrated into Russian Orthodoxy, since the author notes of Simon: "Once he was a Viking, and now, thanks to the grace of God, he became an Orthodox Christian" (Zenkovsky 138). Again, Simon occupies a vital place in the founding of the monastery; he predicted the building of the church and can also act as the ultimate conversion example: "He gave up his Western heresy and became a believer of the one true faith" (Zenkovsky 138). The mingling of Viking and Christian beliefs are present from the very founding of the crypt's holy church.

Discourse 37 in the *Paterikon* is another instance where Varangian and Christian beliefs clearly collide. In this tale, the prince Iziaslav comes to Feodosii and asks him to describe Varangian beliefs to him. Feodosii gives a long list of Varangian religious practices, instructing the prince to beware of all such actions. The adamancy and attention that Feodosii gives to the eradication of Varangian customs implies that they must have been a serious threat to Christian beliefs: "They have dishonored the whole land with the multitude of their heresies, because there are Varangians throughout the land...Whoever preserves himself from them and keeps his faith pure will stand rejoicing at the right hand of God, but whoever willfully draws close to them will stand weeping bitterly" (Heppell 213).

In Discourse 33, Varangians also have an essential function. The monk Feodor lives in a cell known as the "Varangian Cave" and it is there that he is tempted by demons who tell him of an old Varangian treasure trove that lies buried beneath him. This demon may actually be the figure of Odinn himself, since the god has secret knowledge of buried treasures under the earth and burial mounds (Dumezil 28). Feodor is unable to resist the demonic temptation, and

he digs up the hoard and keeps it for himself. Eventually, however, he is saved by another monk, realizes his transgression and reburies the treasure. Similar to Discourse 37, this narrative serves to belittle the Varangians. This continual and emphatic critique of Varangians once again shows that they must have been a serious threat to Christian beliefs. In addition, there were condemnations of paganism repeatedly issued by the Church at this time, alluding to the virulent presence of dual faith (Pascal 8).

It is clear that the Varangians are often directly addressed in the *Paterikon*, but there are also more subtle indications of Varangian influence and the mixing of belief systems. The inexplicable return from the dead is a scenario that happens very frequently in the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon*, and those that reemerge from the land of the dead speak and interact with others, often passing on an important lesson about God and religion. Resurrection is a common occurrence in Christian belief in general, and this belief allows for a breakdown of the barriers of the universe (Brown 2). Nevertheless, the resurrection of bodies in the *Paterikon* takes on a quality that moves beyond standard Christian belief and brings it closer to Viking deities. This type of reanimation is quite common among the Varangians, and the god Odinn dies and is resurrected, giving him special knowledge. It is, in fact, the fear of haunting by those who return from the dead that drives the need for death rituals in Varangian religion (DuBois 70). In this way, the ghosts of those who had an unfortunate death also give a kind of lesson to those still living, emphasizing the need to attend to particular death rituals. The lack of a proper burial as grounds for damnation is a pre-Christian example of pagan beliefs (Fedotov 18). The emphasis on the passing of knowledge, as well as strong elements of haunting, that occurs with the resurrections in the *Paterikon* brings them closer to the Viking version of awakening from the dead. Haunting was a serious threat to Varangians, and precautions such as taking the body out through a hole in the wall so that the ghost could not find its way back, were common occurrences (DuBois 84).

Discourse 32 from the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon* about the monk Marko “Who Was Obeyed by the Dead” is perhaps the best example of the dead returning to life. In this tale, the monk Marko is in charge of digging graves for his fellow monks. Because of his tiredness, he is not able to dig a grave sufficiently wide, and the monks cannot anoint the corpse with holy oil. Again, the centrality of death rituals is emphasized, since the anointing with oil is a vital component of the bur-

ial process. Faced with this predicament, Marko addresses the corpse directly and asks the body to anoint himself with holy oil. Miraculously, the deceased comes to life and completes the task. Marko later orders a different dead body to stay alive a little longer because his grave is not yet completed. In the third and final resurrection episode, a monk is dismayed at the higher burial spot of his younger brother, and Marko orders the corpse to rise and change position. The older brother repents and asks Marko to return the body to the original spot, realizing he should not have disturbed the dead because of his own egotism. Marko refuses, claiming he cannot continuously move bodies, and the elder brother spirals into misery, crying so many tears he eventually goes blind.

Although many such resurrection stories occur in the *Paterikon*, this discourse is unusual in that the dead bodies are actually responding and interacting with Marko. This takes the reanimation to a new level; Marko seems to possess a divine ability, and the miracle represents more than just dead bodies coming to life, since the monk exerts a certain power over them. As Marko himself notes, this miraculous capacity to resurrect the dead is a task that is usually reserved only for God, and Marko's facility to act as a link between the dead and the living has an almost shamanistic quality, similar to the Viking god Odinn and the pagan *volkhivi*.

Some scholars have noted the overt presence of demons and demonic possession in the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon* (Prestel 179), and this is a theme that points to prevalent pagan influences. It is also important to note that the representation of the devil takes on many different forms, some of which allude to oral and folk traditions (Volkova 230). Unlike in Christianity, there is not one devil that is described in opposition to the one God. Instead, there exists a multiplicity of devils that have various forms and personalities. In Discourse 28, the monk Grigorii is described as having miraculous power over demons. The demon is referred to as the "ancient enemy" (Heppell 153) a term that itself could be a reference to the existence of earlier religions in Kievan Rus'. Demonic presence is greatest in Discourse 36 on the monk Isaakii, where ghouls appear everywhere in surprisingly surreal detail: "The cell became full of demons, and the gallery of the caves too. One of the demons, the one they called Christ, said, 'Take pipes and lutes and drums and strike them, and Isaakij will dance for us!'" (Heppell 206). While these demons threaten Isaakii by leading him astray from Christ, they also consistently represent death. After Isa-

akii falls for their guise, he is left nearly dead from exhaustion, and “he just lay there on one side, and often worms collected under his thighs from his excrement and urine” (Heppell 207). Isaakii eventually conquers the demons: “Sometimes they frightened him in the form of a bear, some other fierce beast, or a lion; sometimes they crawled like snakes, or frogs, or mice, or reptiles of all kinds, but they could do nothing to him” (Heppell 209). The ability of the demons to transform themselves into different kinds of animals is similar to Odinn’s transformational power, where he would turn himself into various creatures in order to wreak havoc.

The stories in the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon* are full of menacing demons, Varangian allusions and extreme ascetic suffering. These qualities place the tales somewhat apart from later hagiographical tales in Medieval Rus’ian literature because of their more sinister and life-like content. Although the collection of monastic works is continuously placed in the hagiographic tradition (Adrianova-Peretts 41), this classification sometimes appears as an odd fit. While the stories do concern the lives of saint-like monks, the structure, great variety and narrative style of the tales do not represent the standard hagiographic formula. Most importantly, the figures described are monks, not saints, and even if they may have saintly qualities, they do not have the same status as saints. The preoccupation with death and demonic haunting is profound, making it a fruitful framework for the comparison of Slavic paganism and Viking traditions. The inhabitants of the monastery included all ethnicities and backgrounds, including Varangians themselves, so the possibility for sharing traditions is even greater (Lilienfield 73). The work is also an integral representation of early Christianity, since the stories were collected in the early thirteenth century and the monastery had enormous political, social, and religious influence on early Rus’ian society (Heppell xvii). The monastery had a vibrant cultural character and was the most important literary center predating the Mongol invasion (Prestel 5).

Conversion of a mass population is a slow and complex process, and elements of earlier religious traditions may survive for quite some time. In addition to pre-existing belief systems, the constant migration of Norsemen, facilitated by economic interests and undefined borders, adds another layer of complexity to the spirituality of early Kievan Rus’. As in most religious traditions, death plays an integral role in the worship of deities. Yet it should also be kept in mind that the Christian components of burial customs were often added

into texts at a later date, and so the original version may have been quite different in its representation of death (Collins 146). In the end, Viking, Pagan and early Christian burial practices both converge and diverge in Kievan Rus', which indicates the important, yet contradictory, function of such customs: they can be simultaneously eagerly adapted and strictly forbidden. The understanding of death—and the rituals associated with it—not only serve as an element of divine belief but also appear to have a distinct role in the propagation of society itself, which the controversies concerning the definition of a “proper” burial and a “good” death indicate. As Malinowski points out, “of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death—is of the greatest importance” (47). Death can represent a source of religion as well as an integral organizing element of society, and this latter aspect helps to illuminate the multi-faith environment of early Rus' and the text of the *Kievan Crypt Paterikon*. The tales of the monks living in the Kievan Crypt Monastery provide a rich source of information about cultural and religious beliefs in early Rus', and the narration of death in the *Paterikon* is perhaps the most useful point of departure for a closer analysis of spirituality in Kievan Rus'.

Notes

1. Fedotov goes on to note that exact dating for conversion is difficult, since pagan elements are deeply entrenched in Russian Orthodoxy even to this day (8).
2. Vikings traditionally cremate not only the corpses but also frequently the treasure or sacrifice that accompanies the body, showing their firm belief in ritualistic burning practices (Christiansen 290).
3. In the Viking tradition, the dead or “walking undead” could return in reality or in dreams at any time, even if the corpse was properly buried (Christiansen 285). This phenomenon made the dead a vital presence in the daily life of the Vikings.

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