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Scandinavians in Byzantine Pontus

In Byzantine, Georgian, Armenian, Slavonic and Arabic written sources Scandinavians are referred to as “Varangians”, “Ros”, Rus” or “Ruz”/“Russ”, respectively. These terms overlap to a certain extent and mainly refer to the Swedish Vikings, or Varangians, who in the middle of the ninth century controlled the most of the Baltic - Black Sea river route - “the route from the Varangians to the Greeks”. In addition to this, these terms besides Varangians sometimes included the East Slavic tribes too.

It must be mentioned that the route from the Varangians to the Greeks was the geographical road of the first Russian state and connected Scandinavia, Kievan Rus and the Byzantine Empire. The Swedish Vikings used it as a main path to the riches of Byzantium and the very same connected Western Europe and Levant during the times of the Mediterranean trade decline.

The first records of Scandinavians in the Byzantine written sources are related to the Black Sea area, especially Paphlagonia and Pontus. Specifically, the “Life of Saint George Bishop of Amastris” narrates about the conquest and plunder of Amastris (Amasra) by Rosses. During this military invasion of the 30s of the ninth century, the Vikings had perhaps the first acquaintance with Christianity.

It should be emphasized that the terms and methods used in the written sources to describe the Varangians and Ros are mostly similar and fully correspond both to the antique and medieval perceptions of the “Northern peoples”. But unlike the ancient sources, in medieval written sources these

characteristics, along with ethno-geographical ones, have a broader, confessional meaning and primarily correspond to the pagan inhabitants of the barbaric periphery of the oikumene.

It was there, in Byzantine Pontus, that the first contacts between Scandinavians and Iberians took place. Several Armenian historians, such as Stepanos Taronetsi (Asoghik, 11th c.) and Aristakes Lastivertsi (11th c.) confirm this fact. These data of Armenian sources expand and clarify the evidence of Byzantine sources to a large extent.

Aristakes Lastivertci writes about two military campaigns of the Byzantine emperor Basil II the Bulgar Slayer (958-1025) where he specifically tells about the winter stay of the Byzantine military troops of Ros in Pontus. Georgian Annals confirm this information. The Byzantine tagma of 6000 Rosses was also represented in Pontus during the reign of Constantine the VIII (960-1028). And the joint Varangian-Ros military troop was placed in Chaldea and Iberia in the middle of the ninth century under Michael Akoluph.

In the Byzantine Acts and Trapezuntine documentary sources (Acts of Vazelon) occur prenomens and patronyms such as “Varangos” and “Varangopulos” which can be identified as the names of Scandinavian or Slavic origin.

Analysis of the antroponymic material of the Byzantine authors leads us to the conclusion that Scandinavians were represented on high levels in the social structure of the Byzantine Empire. The existence of names of Scandinavian origin in Byzantine and Trapezuntine documentary sources allows us to conclude that Varangians probably lived in both Constantinople and Pontus and became an integral part of polyethnic structure of Byzantine society.