

# Vladimir I of Kiev

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**Vladimir Svyatoslavich the Great**, also sometimes spelled **Volodymyr** Old East Slavic: *Володимѣрь Святославичь* (c. 958 – 15 July 1015, Berestovo) was the grand prince of Kiev who converted to Christianity in 987<sup>[1]</sup>, and proceeded to baptise the whole Kievan Rus. His name may be spelled in different ways: in modern Ukrainian as *Volodymyr* (*Володимир*), in Old Church Slavonic and modern Russian as *Vladimir* (*Владимир*), in Old Norse as *Valdamarr* and the modern Scandinavian languages as *Valdemar*.

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### *Saint Vladimir of Kiev*



Golden coin of Vladimir, with his portrait and personal emblem

### Grand Prince of Kiev

<b>Born</b>	c. 958
<b>Died</b>	1015
<b>Venerated in</b>	Anglicanism Eastern Orthodoxy Lutheranism Roman Catholicism
<b>Feast</b>	July 15
<b>Attributes</b>	crown, cross, throne

## Way to the throne

Vladimir was the youngest son of Sviatoslav I of Kiev by his housekeeper Malusha, described in the Norse sagas as a prophethess who lived to the age of 100 and was brought from her cave to the palace to predict the future. Malusha's brother Dobrynya was Vladimir's tutor and most trusted advisor. Hagiographic tradition of dubious authenticity also connects his childhood with the name of his grandmother, Olga Prekrasa, who was Christian and governed the capital during Sviatoslav's frequent military campaigns.

Transferring his capital to Preslavets in 969, Sviatoslav designated Vladimir ruler of Novgorod the Great but gave Kiev to his legitimate son Yaropolk. After Sviatoslav's death (972), a fratricidal war erupted (976) between Yaropolk and his younger brother Oleg, ruler of the Drevlians. In 977 Vladimir fled to his kinsmen Haakon

*Vladimir and Rogneda* (1770).

Sigurdsson, ruler of Norway in Scandinavia, collecting as many of the Viking warriors as he could to assist him to recover Novgorod, and on his return the next year marched against Yaropolk.

On his way to Kiev he sent ambassadors to Rogvolod (Norse: Ragnvald), prince of Polotsk, to sue for the hand of his daughter Rogneda (Norse: Ragnhild). The well-born princess refused to affiance herself to the son of a bondswoman, but Vladimir attacked Polotsk, slew Rogvolod, and took Ragnhild by force. Actually, Polotsk was a key fortress on the way to Kiev, and the capture of Polotsk and Smolensk facilitated the taking of Kiev (980), where he slew Yaropolk by treachery, and was proclaimed konung, or khagan, of all Kievan Rus.

## Years of pagan rule

In addition to his father's extensive domain, Vladimir continued to expand his territories. In 981 he conquered the Cherven cities, the modern Galicia; in 983 he subdued the Yatvingians, whose territories lay between Lithuania and Poland; in 985 he led a fleet along the central rivers of Russia to conquer the Bulgars of the Kama, planting numerous fortresses and colonies on his way.

Though Christianity had won many converts since Olga's rule, Vladimir had remained a thorough going pagan, taking eight hundred concubines (besides numerous wives) and erecting pagan statues and shrines to gods. It is argued that he attempted to reform Slavic paganism by establishing thunder-god Perun as a supreme deity.

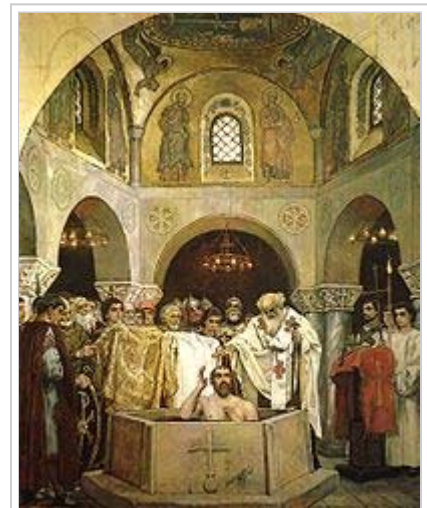
## Baptism of Rus



Campaigns of Kiev Princes X-XI (in Russian)

The Primary Chronicle reports that in the year 987, as the result of a consultation with his boyars, Vladimir sent envoys to study the religions of the various neighboring nations whose representatives had been urging him to embrace their respective faiths. The result is amusingly described by the chronicler Nestor. Of the Muslim Bulgarians of the Volga the envoys reported there is no gladness among them; only sorrow and a great stench, and that their religion was undesirable due to its taboo against alcoholic

beverages and pork; supposedly, Vladimir said on that occasion: "Drinking is the joy of the Rus'." Russian sources also describe Vladimir consulting with Jewish envoys (who may or may not have been Khazars), and questioning them about their religion but ultimately rejecting it, saying that their loss of Jerusalem was evidence of their having been abandoned by God. Ultimately Vladimir settled on Christianity. In the churches of the Germans his emissaries saw no beauty; but at Constantinople, where the full festival ritual of the



The Baptism of Saint Prince Vladimir, by Viktor Vasnetsov (1890)

Byzantine Church was set in motion to impress them, they found their ideal: *"We no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth,"* they reported, describing a majestic Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sophia, *"nor such beauty, and we know not how to tell of it."* If Vladimir was impressed by this account of his envoys, he was yet more so by political gains of the Byzantine alliance.



A mid-19th century statue overlooking the Dnieper in Kiev, by Peter Klodt and Vasily Demut-Malinovsky

In 988, having taken the town of Chersonesos in Crimea, he boldly negotiated for the hand of the emperor Basil II's sister, Anna. Never before had a Byzantine imperial princess, and one "born-in-the-purple" at that, married a barbarian, as matrimonial offers of French kings and German emperors had been peremptorily rejected. In short, to marry the 27-year-old princess off to a pagan Slav seemed impossible. Vladimir, however, was baptized at Cherson, taking the Christian name of Basil out of compliment to his imperial brother-in-law; the sacrament was followed by his wedding with Anna. Returning to Kiev in triumph, he destroyed pagan monuments and established many churches, starting with the splendid Church of the Tithes (989) and monasteries on Mt. Athos.



Icon of Saint Vladimir, Novgorod, 16th century

Arab sources, both Muslim and Christian, present a different story of Vladimir's conversion. Yahya of Antioch, al-Rudhrawari, al-Makin, al-Dimashki, and ibn al-Athir<sup>[2]</sup> all give essentially the same account. In 987, Bardas Sclerus and Bardas Phocas revolted against the Byzantine emperor Basil II. Both rebels briefly joined forces, but then Bardas Phocas proclaimed himself emperor on September 14, 987. Basil II turned to the Kievan Rus' for assistance, even though they were considered enemies at that time. Vladimir agreed, in exchange for a marital tie; he also agreed to accept Orthodox Christianity as his religion and bring his people to the new faith. When the wedding arrangements were settled, Vladimir dispatched 6,000 troops to the Byzantine Empire and they helped to put down the revolt.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Christian reign

He then formed a great council out of his boyars, and set his twelve sons over his subject principalities.

It is mentioned in the Primary Chronicle that Volodymir founded the city of Bilgorod in 991.

In 992 he went on a campaign against the Croats, most likely the White Croats (an East Slavic group unrelated to the White Croats that lived in Dalmatia) that lived on the border of modern Ukraine. This campaign was cut short by the attacks of the Pechenegs on and around Kiev.

In his later years he lived in a relative peace with his other neighbours neighbors: Boleslav I of Poland, Stephen I of Hungary, Andrikh the Czech (questionable character mentioned in *A Tale of the Bygone Years*).

After Anna's death, he married again, most likely to a granddaughter of Otto the Great.

In 1014 his son Yaroslav the Wise stopped paying tribute. Volodymir decided to chastise the insolence of his son, and began gathering troops against Yaroslav. However, Volodymir fell ill, most likely of old age and died at Berestovo, near Kiev.

The various parts of his dismembered body were distributed among his numerous sacred foundations and were venerated as relics.

## Vladimir's significance and historical footprint

One of the largest Kievan cathedrals is dedicated to him. The University of Kiev was named after the man who both civilized and Christianized Kievan Rus. There is the Russian Order of St. Vladimir and Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in the United States. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate the feast day of St. Vladimir on 15 July.

His memory was also kept alive by innumerable Russian folk ballads and legends, which refer to him as *Krasno Solnyshko*, that is, the *Fair Sun*. With him the Varangian period of Eastern Slavic history ceases and the Christian period begins.

## See also

- Family life and children of Vladimir I
- List of Russian rulers
- List of Ukrainian rulers
- List of people known as The Great

## Notes

1. ^ Covenant Worldwide - Ancient & Medieval Church History
2. ^ Ibn al-Athir dates these events to 985 or 986
3. ^ "Rus". *Encyclopaedia of Islam*

## References



Modern statue of Vladimir in London



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Preceded by <b>Yaropolk I</b>	<b>Prince of Kiev and Novgorod</b> 978-1015	Succeeded by <b>Sviatopolk I</b>
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