

Kiev and Constantinople: Cultural Relations before the Thirteenth Century

Zinaida V. Udal'cova

 For a long time during the Middle Ages Europe not only witnessed but was also a participant in the struggle led by the two world centres of the West and the East, i.e. by Rome and Constantinople in the spheres of politics, religion, ideology and culture. Drawn into the struggle was the largest and most powerful state of Eastern Europe -- Kievan Russia. While the West had its face turned to Rome, Russia and the Balkans were oriented towards East Rome -- Constantinople. The relations between Russia and Constantinople underwent a long and complex course of development. Age-old relations of trade bound the Old Russian state with the capital of the Byzantine empire. All the trading routes from Russia to the Mediterranean converged in the end in the city on the Bosphorus. Paraphrasing a famous ancient dictum, Academician M.N. Tikhomirov wrote that "for the Russian travellers all the roads led to 'New Rome'",¹ which always attracted Russian diplomats, merchants, pilgrims, painters, bookish men, and monks.

The adoption of Christianity was the result of not only internal causes but also of the All-European events that took place on the international arena.² As two competing centres of Christendom Rome and Constantinople lived their own and, often, separate life. The socio-economic and political development of Byzantium and the West frequently went on different paths. Essential differences began to show between the Eastern - Orthodox and Western - Catholic churches. Nominal church unity was recognized both by Rome and Constantinople, but actually for many centuries St. Peter's chair and Constantinopolitan patriarchate were engaged in an ever abating struggle now covert and

now open to achieve religious and political leadership. The struggle abounded in dramatic collisions and passionate dogmatic polemics between the different trends of the theological-philosophical thought. Between the Eastern and Western churches there emerged considerable divergences of both socio-political and of dogmatic and ceremonial nature. These divergences reflected in many respects, to be sure, the differences in the social structuring and ideological life of Byzantium and the West. The Orthodox church in Byzantium existed in the conditions of a centralized state and, unlike the Papacy in the West, was not a carrier of universalistic tendencies but advocated unity between church and state.³

Rome and Constantinople were always contending for superiority in the world of Christendom. Rome viewed Western Europe as its sphere of influence while Constantinople thought of Eastern Europe and the Balkans as such. The struggle between the two world capitals was long and stubborn and resulted, as is well known, in the 11th century's division of the churches. The struggle for the spheres of influence was determined by the real correlation of forces between Rome and Constantinople. Having retained the Balkans, Constantinople sought also to keep the territories of Western Slavs and Hungary. However, Rome proved to be the stronger in these countries. Constantinople found itself in a difficult situation, having got tied up in the East from where it was permanently threatened, first, by the Arabs and then by the Turkic peoples. In Moravia the mission of Cyril and Methodius was initially successful but later, as is known, the Orthodoxy was defeated there. With the same outcome the struggle ended for the Orthodox Church in Poland and Hungary. Constantinople was falling back.⁴

The only and the largest Slavic country that remained was Kievan Russia. It was the last verge at which the spiritual swords of Rome and Constantinople were measured. The princely authorities in Kiev tried to manoeuvre between Constantinople and Rome. The spread of Christianity in Kievan Russia had begun much earlier than the Baptism. One neither can exclude the penetration of the influence of the Catholic religion in Russia as a reflection of which serve, in particular, the *Vitae* of Benedict of Nur, Anastasia of Rome, and of popular in the West St. Vitus which were translated from Latin and were current among the Russian-language literature of the kind. The example of Princess Olga, who undertook negotiations concerning Christianisation both with Constantinople and with Rome and who asked Otton I to send her Catholic clergy, shows that Kiev was reached both by the arms of First and Second Rome. One of the reasons that obliged

Princess Olga to address herself to the Catholic West was her failed negotiations with Byzantium's emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus during her visit to Constantinople in 957. It can hardly be doubted that that mission had been undertaken by the pagan-princess before Olga converted to Christianity.⁵

But in contrast to the Polabian and Western Slavs, in Kiev the balance was tilted in favour of the Orthodox Church. In Kievan Russia the conditions for the struggle between Rome and Constantinople were different compared to those in the other Slavic territories. In the West Rome found its ally in German feudals and local nobility. The situation in Kievan Russia took a different shape. By the moment of its adoption of Christianity Kievan Russia had been already a powerful state with a great number of cities and with developed forms of handicraft and trading. Foreign merchants and diplomats called it a country of cities; referring to the 11th-12th centuries chronicles mention over 220 urban centres the largest among which were Kiev, Chernigov, Pereyaslavl, Vladimir Volynski, Galich, Turov, Smolensk, Polotsk, Novgorod, Vladimir of Suzdal, Ryazan and many others.⁶ The military might of the Kievan rulers was also impressive.

One of the most ancient and beautiful European towns, the capital city of Kiev has recently celebrated its 1500th anniversary. It occupied a prominent place among the other urban centres of the Old Russian state and in all Eastern Europe too. Kiev was honoured with a proud and gentle name of the "mother of Russian cities" which is mentioned in a chronicle. It was a large and rich city, the economic and political centre of Old Russia. A German chronologist Adam of Bremen (11th century) referred to it as the pearl of the East and Second Constantinople.⁷ The extremely favourable geographical and military strategic position of Kiev, found in the centre of Russian territories on the high and forbidding steep slopes of the Dnieper, ensured its prevalence over the north-south waterways and opened access to the Black and Azov Seas and, hence, to such rich countries as Byzantium, Danube Bulgaria, the Crimea and Khazaria. Kiev was the place of residence of the Grand Duke who had suzerain powers over the entire state. Residing also in the capital of Kievan Russia were feudal nobility, the Duke's court and body-guards, skillful craftsmen and rich merchants. The Prince of Kiev preserved his independence.⁸ No Byzantine stratiotes or German crusaders stood at the time at the gateway of Kiev. The princely power faced the problem of consolidating the autocratic state. Prince Vladimir Svyatoslavich (980-1015) is known to have tried to solve it first by supporting Paganism but later he himself turned to Christianity. He was, however, to

decide, just as princess Olga did, between the Western and Eastern Christianity. It can be stated with confidence that Vladimir was taking his decision on that problem under strong diplomatic pressure from both Rome and Constantinople. And the famous story by a Russian chronicler about the choice of the faith by Vladimir is not such a naive legend, after all. Reflected in the story was the real situation of Russia on the international arena of struggle between the West and Byzantium. While the Slavs in the West had had already no alternative by that time, Russia still had a choice. It was more advantageous for Kiev to deal with Constantinople, for it had in its hands the Baltic-Black Sea trade route and maintained long adjusted economic and political relations with Byzantium, not always peaceful though. For many centuries Kiev was in communication with Constantinople.⁹ Its contacts with the West were weaker.

Christianisation of the Old Russian state was a complex and long process. It began approximately one century before the official baptism of Russia and proceeded in the conditions of struggle against paganism. Under Princess Olga the adoption of Christianity as a state religion did not occur, probably, because of the ambitious aspirations of Byzantium to turn Russia after its Christianisation into a vassal state. However, the advantages from the rapprochement with the Christian countries, i.e. with Byzantium and Orthodox Bulgaria were so great that Prince Vladimir once again undertook realization of that project.¹⁰

The choice of Prince Vladimir in favour of Christianisation from Byzantium was dictated by the state interest of Kievan Russia. A union with the dangerous and insidious Greek ruler was much preferable than permanent wars and exhausting naval campaigns which were an obstacle to the economic and cultural relations with the great Roman power. Taken into consideration was also the unfortunate results experienced by the Western-Slavic countries where the spread of the Catholic religion was a part of the "Drang nach Osten" of the German feudal lords.¹¹ Vladimir's decision was influenced in some measure also by the dynastic considerations, i.e. by the struggle for power with his brother Yaropolk who was biased toward the West and towards a union with Poland and papacy, and supported the idea of adopting the Catholic religion in Russia. The aggressive air of the Catholic West and the great activity of the Papacy in its struggle for the Christianisation of Russia could not go unnoticed, and caused dissatisfaction in the country. The attempt undertaken by Vladimir to unite the state on the basis of the pagan religion was

unsuccessful, as paganism had its roots traceable into the past. By contrast, the adoption of Christianity would open for Russia a way to a more active stand on the international arena.

Prince Vladimir was very fortunate in timing his agreement with the Empire: the Roman power had been weakened by its two-front struggle against the Bulgarians and against the usurper Varda Phoka who raised a revolt in Asia Minor.¹² Being in need of the military support from the Russians, Emperor Basilius II (976-1025) agreed to the marriage union between Prince Vladimir and his sister porphyrogenitus Princess Anna. However, having been saved by the Russian forces which destroyed the usurper's army, the Emperor was delaying the conclusion of a union with Russia. In response to the treachery of the basilisk Prince Vladimir invaded the Crimea, took Hersones (Korsun) and made Byzantium fulfill its promise. Around 988 (989) the Kievan Prince became related with the Emperor's house, married Anna and adopted Christianity.¹³ "Under such circumstances any vassality was out of the question".¹⁴ Following the Prince, boyars and residents of Kiev and other cities of the Old Russian state were also christened. "Nominally Russia became Christian. The funeral fires, which burnt bondwomen, and the fires of Peroun, who demanded sacrifices like ancient Minotaurus, went out...".¹⁵ But the covert worshipping of the pagan gods continued long afterwards, and only gradually paganism merged with Christendom. In Kiev the process of Baptism was accompanied with collisions with heathens. "The thing was crowned, as is known, with a grand execution over the ancient gods performed by the Byzantine Christendom on the famous hill behind the tower's yard. The reprisal was taking place before the eyes of the protesting people".¹⁶

The consequences of the adoption of the Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium in Russia were diverse and, at times, contradictory. In the international arena the union with Byzantium was advantageous for Russia as it assumed an equal place among the other influential Christian states of Medieval Europe. At the same time Russia was not freed from the necessity to continue its permanent resistance to the political and ecclesiastic claims of the Empire which, following the Christianisation of Russia, tried to subordinate Russia to its leadership. The adoption of Orthodoxy entailed temporal complications in the relations with the West and, particularly, with the St. Peter's chair. But and, probably, most importantly the adoption of Christianity served as a powerful stimulus for the acquaintance of Russia with the Byzantine culture. Through Byzantium Russia gained access to the century-old world civili-

zation, including the heritage of the antique world and of the Near East.¹⁷

With the adoption of Christianity in Russia and the establishment of more close ecclesiastic and political relations between the Old Russian State and Byzantium the Russian-Byzantine cultural ties became more intensive too. At that time the influence of the Byzantine education was becoming growingly important in Russia. In the 11th-13th centuries the perception of some elements of the Byzantine civilization in Russia assisted to the further development of the Russian feudal society, met its internal requirements and was enriching its culture. The establishment of close cultural ties of Old Russia with Byzantium was not a mere accident but a process of which both sides were quite conscious and which took place upon mutual agreement between the two states. On the part of the ruling class of Old Russia it meant turning to the culture of the most advanced European country of the time, i.e. turning to the highest, most complicated and refined models. And "That culture was just right for the Russian people and fitted the high requirements of its development".¹⁸

On the part of Byzantium the spreading of its cultural influence on Russia was active and purposeful in character and constituted one of the links in the general policy the Empire conducted in the neighbouring countries. In the wake of its far-reaching designs to subordinate the Old Russian State to its political influence and church hegemony, Byzantium was trying to apply the tested expedient of ideological and cultural influence upon Russia. Hence, the Byzantine cultural influence in Russia as, by the way, in other countries too, was never spontaneous or passive, on the contrary, it was skillfully directed by the firm hand of the Byzantine political and church leaders and diplomats. However, one should not overestimate or underestimate the strength and scale of the Byzantine influence whose intensity was different in different spheres of culture. In some spheres a synthesis of the Byzantine heritage with the local cultural traditions was taking place while in others the impact of Byzantium was more superficial and looked like a thin layer superimposed on the original culture of this or that people. As a rule, the degree of assimilation of the Byzantine heritage depended on the level of development of the pre-Christian culture in question. The higher the level of the local pagan culture, the stronger it preserved its traditions of the heathen folk and the more limited the influence of the Byzantine civilization was. The same is fully applicable in the case of the cultural ties between Old Russia and Byzantium.¹⁹ In studying the problem of Byzantium's influence upon Russia one

should not forget that the Empire's official doctrine aimed at subordinating Russia to the political and church power of Byzantium proved to be insolvent in essence. Thanks to the creative attitude towards the Byzantine civilization in Russia, the Byzantine models were soon subject to active remaking and deep reinterpretation in line with the social conditions of life and intellectual requirements of the Russian society. Moreover, in many instances when the Byzantine influence hindered further progressive development of the Russian original culture, it ran into serious resistance to itself. And though it is paradoxical to the first sight, but in Russia Byzantium seemed to have created its own rival not only in the sphere of politics but in that of culture too. The attempts of Byzantium to subordinate Russia spiritually were conducive to the growth of national identity feelings among the Russian society which found, as is known, their most vivid expression in the famous "Word on the law and benefit" by Illarion, in the creation, in defiance of the Eastern Church of a pantheon of Russian Saints (i.e. canonization of Boris and Gleb), and in the construction of rich princely and urban residence places in Kiev and other cities. Under Yaroslav the Wise, in Kiev its own Golden Gates (now completely restored) and its own beautiful St. Sophia Cathedral were built as if to compete with the famous structure of Constantinople.

The space of a brief paper does not allow taking up all of the aspects of cultural ties of Kievan Russia with Byzantium. We shall center our attention therefore on the cultural ties between Russia and Byzantium in the sphere of architecture, fine and applied arts.

To be sure Byzantium had played an important part in the development of the Old Russian artistic culture, but, again, the Byzantine influence in this sphere was neither universal nor stable.²⁰ The degree of influence of the Byzantine civilization and the scale of the Byzantine impact on the artistic creativity of Old Russia were different in time and space. Contacts with Byzantium were most fruitful and intensive in the southern and southwestern areas of Russia and considerably weaker in the northern and northeastern ones. The impact of the Byzantine culture was, of course, more intensive in the higher societal layers of different countries -- the princes and feudal lords of the states in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe were imitating the etiquette of the Byzantine court as well as some features of the everyday life and customs of Constantinople, while the wider masses of people were affected by the Byzantine influence to a lesser extent by far. At different stages of the development of the Old Russian culture the Byzantine influence fluctuated

up and down in its intensity. There were periods of rapprochement and estrangement and of temporal attenuation of cultural ties and of their intensive renewal. The artistic achievements of Byzantine masters of culture did not find equal response in the separate kinds of arts.²¹

The 10th-12th centuries were the times of the most active artistic contacts between Russia and Byzantium. The centre of such ties at the time was Kiev which was directly connected with the capital of the Byzantine Empire Constantinople. The capital city on the Dnieper River was the place visited by diplomatic missions from Constantinople which brought with them rich gifts from the Byzantine emperors, and by the Greek clergy with their commissions from the Patriarch of Constantinople, the city also attracted caravans of Greek merchants with their refined items of luxury and works of the Byzantine applied arts. The Kievan princes were the first to invite from Byzantium such Greek masters as architects, painters, stone carvers, mosaicists and jewellers. It was in Kiev that the wide-scale construction of cult objects and palaces was started with the help of Greek architects.

At first the Byzantine influence grew most manifest in the architecture of Old Russia.²² In the late 10th-11th centuries Russia adopted from Byzantium its stone architecture with its complex type of cross-shaped domed temples, a perfect system of floors and the highest at the time techniques of engineering. In contrast to the Roman West with only some of its areas witnessing at the time a slow and hard process of transition from wooden structures to stone vaults and arches, Kievan Russia received very early from Byzantium a practically ready-made and perfect system of vaulted and domed floors and ceilings as well as buildings of fine and slender spatial configuration and of great height.²³

The first stone cathedral in the Russian land, i.e. the cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God (the so-called Desyatinnaya Church) in Kiev (989-996) was built, as evidenced by the data of chronicles, by Greek masters. A few decades later in 1031-1036 Greek architects erected in Chernigov a cathedral of the Our Saviour's Transfiguration which, in the opinion of specialists, is the most Byzantine cathedral of Old Russia. Its austere architectural forms, the elegant simplicity of compositional aspects as well as the refinement of its external ornamentation and the purely Byzantine masonry bring it close to the best samples of the Byzantine capital architecture of the 11th century.²⁴

The church of St. Sophia in Kiev (1037-1054) is the acme in South-Russian architecture of the 11th

century. The church was meant to revive in the Kievan land the traditions of the main sanctuary of the Orthodox world, i.e. of St. Sophia of Constantinople. The St. Sophia church of Constantinople symbolized the victory of Christendom in the entire civilized oikoumene and the might of Byzantine emperors, and, similarly, St. Sophia of Kiev was meant to consolidate Orthodoxy in Old Russia and the strength of the Grand Duke's power. It was only natural, however, that the realization of this ideological concept in Constantinople and Kiev was different. Kievan St. Sophia was the favourite creation of Prince Yaroslav the Wise (1016-1054). It is a huge cathedral with five naves and spacious galleries embracing the side naves. The cathedral was built jointly by Greek and Russian artists and has no direct analogies among the church architectural monuments of Byzantium. While preserving the Byzantine type of cross-shaped domed cathedrals Kievan St. Sophia signaled gradual departure of the Old Russian architecture from the Byzantine models. The stepped external composition, the thirteen domes, and the massive cross-shaped pillars, made the interior space more cramped, -- all of this lended the master cathedral of Kievan Russia an air of originality of its own. St. Sophia of Kiev combined monumental power with festival solemnity and picturesque appearance that blended so well with the gentle and gay landscape of South Russia.²⁵

Removed even further from the Byzantine samples was the architecture of Great Novgorod, Pskov and Vladimir-Suzdal Russia whose analysis is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Old Russian architecture did not know such leaps in its development as those from the Roman style to Gothic and to the Renaissance in Western Europe. The process of formation of national traits in the Old Russian architecture was slower and smoother, having found its completion later in the architectural style of Moscow Russia. The latest studies by Soviet researchers have shown that the Old Russian architects were well equipped with high standard mathematical and technological knowledge. Each structure built by them was an embodiment of a strict mathematical system and of complex engineering calculations.²⁶

The Byzantine influence in the painting art of Old Russia was more prolonged and more stable than in architecture. It is quite understandable if one remembers that apart from introducing Russian painters to the techniques of the mosaics, frescoes and tempera painting Byzantium provided them with the iconographical canon whose purity was strictly protected by the Orthodox Church. The teams of painters consisting of Greek and Russian masters were usually guided in

their work by Byzantine models, i.e. by the so-called "originals". However, the prevalence of the iconographical canon and the practice of model imitation fettered to some extent the original artistic style of the masters of Old Russia.²⁷

The 11th-12th centuries were the period of flourishing of the Byzantine painting and the final stage in the formation of the solemn and elevated Byzantine style and Byzantine aesthetics. In parallel with the fine works of the metropolitan art such as the mosaic pictures in the southern gallery of St. Sophia of Constantinople and in the Daphne monastery near Athens, gaining momentum and developing an artistic language of their own were some provincial schools of painting that produced such fine works as the mosaic pictures of Chosios Lucas in Phokide and of Nea Moni in Chios.

At that time the influence of Byzantium was reaching Russia in different ways, i.e. directly from Constantinople and from the western areas of Byzantium via Thessalonica in the Balkans and Afos.²⁸ In the 11th-12th century Russia knew two traditions of church painting decorations. One of them was stricter and more solemn and is traceable back to the monumental painting style of Byzantium, while the other, less restricted and more picturesque, took its shape on the Russian soil.²⁹

A classical monument of the former tradition is the church of Saint Sophia in Kiev decorated strictly in line with the Byzantine iconographical canon. Its mosaics and frescoes were produced by joint efforts (1037-1067) of Byzantine and Old Russian masters. The decorative ornamentation of the huge cathedral is strikingly monumental and versatile. In the opinion of experts, the cathedral's mosaics reveal two trends present in the Byzantine artistic approach. The first trend owes its origin to the Constantinopolitan school of painting and is distinguished by a high level of finish and refined artistic forms. Reflected in the other trend is the influence of the provincial and more archaic art as embodied in the mosaics of Chosios Lucas in Phokide.³⁰ Soaring in the cupola is Christ Pantokrator, and standing alone in the semidome of an apse is the figure of Orante Virgin. In Kiev she was worshiped as the protector and assistant of the city and was called the Mother of God "Nerushimaya stena" (Wall indestructible). The figure of Maria is full of dignity and majestic calm; the colours are bright with prevalent intensive blue, golden-yellow and white paints against a golden background which lends the depiction an air of solemnity and paradeness. Considered to be the best among the apse mosaics are the depictions of Saints, i.e. the so-called Saints'

frieze. The Saints are depicted frontally in austere poses and look very monumental; their faces have some personal and even psychological features and mirror the Hellenic traditions of portraiture. In the opinion of V.N. Lazarev this Saints' frieze gives one "...a distinct feeling of a breeze blowing from the great metropolitan art".³² Artistically inferior to these mosaics is the scene of Eucharistia depicted in the apse: the Apostles there are shown in statically monotonous postures, their faces lack any personal traits, the interpretation of the figures is dry and the colouring is somewhat gloomy. This composition reminds similar mosaic picture from the monastery of Chosios Lucas.

The cathedral is extremely rich with frescoes which have been sufficiently well studied by now although many questions pertaining to their identification remain open to discussion.³³ In the central part of Kievan St. Sophia there is a spacious fresco evangelical cycle with a great number of multi-figured compositions. Some of the frescoes have, unfortunately, been damaged by the time. In their style and iconography they are close to the frescoes of the Chosios Lucas monastery in Phokide and Nea Moni of the Chios island. The frescoes of the cycle in Kievan St. Sophia are notably monumental, solemnly symmetrical, and have some large and somewhat heavy figures set in static frontal poses. All of this endows the composition with an air of epic calm and majesty. The range of its colours attracts the eye with its brightness and a rich palette of light white, gray, rose-violet, green and violet shades. The multifigured scenes are usually depicted against a blue background. The frescoes of Kievan St. Sophia are typically characterized by the abundance of separate depiction of single male and female Saints whose faces are often provided with portrait features. Their faces are austere but without asceticism, and are spiritually inspired but, again, without fanatical exaltation. Like all the other frescoes they are marked with epic calmness and concentrated self-absorption. By the numbers of individual depictions of Saints Kievan St. Sophia has no equals among the monuments of the 11th century.

Particularly interesting for scholars, both art critics and historians, are the frescoes of Kievan St. Sophia presenting a group portrait of the family of Prince Yaroslav. Their exact identification and interpretation of the composition as a whole are much hampered by the poor state of preservation and by later restorations. The latest discoveries, however, have demonstrated that this group portrait consisted of thirteen and not of eleven figures as it was believed before. In the centre of the western wall was depicted

Jesus Christ sitting on a throne and flanked on the one side by Prince Yaroslav with his elder son and by Princess Irina with her elder daughter -- on the other. The Prince was offering Christ, his protector, a model of cathedral. On the southern wall there were figures of four daughters, and on the northern wall -- of the four sons of the princely pair, who were directed towards the centre of the composition. The Prince and his Princess were depicted in luxurious grand duke clothes with nearly tsar crowns on their heads. As intended by Yaroslav the entire ctitoris scene was to symbolize the might and independence of Kievan Russia, and the power and wealth of its Grand Duke.³⁴

The better preserved of the Yaroslav's family group portrait are the figures of his four daughters on the southern wall of the cathedral. The princesses wear beautiful robes richly decorated with precious stones and are moving to the right towards the centre of the composition; two of them are carrying candles which provide the entire procession with a solemn ritualistic air. According to a hypothesis, which admittedly causes debates, depicted here are Yaroslav's daughters Elizabeth, Anna and Anastasia -- the would-be queens of Norway, France and Hungary -- and the youngest juvenile princess whose name is unknown. The princesses are shown as young girls not married yet to the foreign rulers. Their faces are painted in the conventional medieval manner but are attractive and have some personal portrait traits. The face of the third daughter is especially pretty and womanly and breathes with charm and calm dignity. Unfortunately the portraits of the Prince's sons on the northern wall have survived only in fragments. The ctitoris composition of Kievan St. Sophia has an analogy with a similar scene depicted in the mosaic picture on the southern gallery wall of St. Sophia of Constantinople. In that mosaic, as is known, Emperor Constantine Monomach and Empress Zoe are offering throned Christ as a gift a bag with gold and a parchment roll listing the Emperor's donations to the principal cathedral of the Byzantine Empire. The ctitoris composition of Kievan St. Sophia was finished, probably, around 1045 when none of Yaroslav's daughters had been a queen yet. Thus the life-work of the Prince was completed as undertaken to glorify the greatness of his State.

Yaroslav the Wise was buried in St. Sophia of Kiev in a marble sarcophagus. It is interesting to note that in the words of B.A. Rybakov this sarcophagus is a kind of "book of Visitors" of the cathedral: its plates are signed by hundreds of people beginning from dwellers of 11th century Kiev and to the Poles of the 17th century. B.A. Rybakov calls the cathedral of St. Sophia a museum of the Old Russian epigraphy with numerous graffiti