**Title:** *Antiquity’s forgotten heir – early medieval classical reception in the Eastern Slavic tradition*

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**Abstract**

This essay aims to provide a simple but substantial overview of the early medieval classical reception in the Eastern Slavic culture. Using evidence from archaeological sites, folkloric tales, and Old Church Slavonic texts, it will explore how the Eastern Slavic population interacted with classical antiquity pre-Peter the Great, before the 17th-18th centuries’ reforms artificially incorporated the Greco-Roman antiquity into art, literature, and education in the Russian Empire. The goal is to provide a solid foundation for the more explored periods of classical reception in the Eastern Slavic tradition, while simultaneously highlighting its continuous awareness of the Greco-Roman past. This essay intends to diversify the discussion by the introduction of a new, fresh example, not so explored by western scholarship. It believes that the parallels and contrasts that can be traced between common western examples and the Slavic experience can benefit greatly our understanding of classical reception as a worldwide phenomenon affecting various - and sometimes unexpected - cultures up to modern days.

**Keywords:** Eastern Slavic, Classical Reception, Slavic Mythology, Orthodox Church, Early Medieval.

**Main article**

Slavic classical reception in the early medieval period presents a fascinating case study that is not often subjected to thorough analysis. [1] However, an overview of the available material suggests great benefit from its analysis, providing the tradition with historical continuity through its constant awareness of the Greco-Roman legacy. Upon the territories of modern Ukraine, the classical past has been an ever-present cultural, social, religious, and military influence that shaped the lives of the Eastern Slavic population: as such, the example provided by Ukraine proves to be a source of great insight on classicism’s impact on later foreign traditions.

Several archaeological reports from across the Ukrainian territories provide strong connections between the old Scythian lands and the Greco-Roman society. There is proof of trade with the Greek lands, with material evidence following the same multi-cultural pattern as found in other Greek colonies built in foreign territories: [2] in Olbia (Pontic region), Attic vases were discovered dating to the 5th century BC. [3] The Zmiinyi Island – also known as Snake Island – has been identified with the island of Leuke, an old site of worship for Achilles Pontarkes; likewise, fragments of an Attic vessel dated to the 5th century BC at Tyras and Nikonion (located in the Pontic region) presents a graffiti naming Achilles ‘Lord over Scythia’. [4] With settlements like Chersonesus establishing the direct impact of Greek colonisation and the coastal lands being later subjected to Roman rule, Ukraine presents a case of direct interaction with the classical past, its further links, thus, based on a close relationship dated to the ancient times.

The impact of antiquity, however, did not cease with the fall of the Roman Empire. While the influence of Byzantium over the Eastern Slavic territories can be traced through an economic and political exchange, these interactions were most prominent within the ecclesiastical tradition. The arrival of Orthodoxy to the Ukrainian lands marked the assimilation of the Byzantine culture into the Slavic literary tradition: [5] the Cyrillic alphabet was brought by two Byzantine monks, Cyril and Methodius, allowing for the writing tradition to prosper. This culture of translation did not only involve later Byzantine materials; [6] their acquisition marked the incorporation of antique literature as referential material within ecclesiastical writing. In the *Life of Constantine* and the *Life of Catherine*, one can find direct mentions of Homer, while the *Life of Eustratius* explores the nature of the pagan god Zeus. [7] Moreover, the *Life of Constantine*, as noted by Egunov, transforms the name into a noun, equalling the author’s name to Literature itself. [8] Between the formation of its alphabet and the implementation of classical references from the Greek past, the Slavonic language owes a great part of its development to Byzantium and ancient Greece. This tendency is later followed by Lomonosov’s classical reforms in the 18th century, finishing in Pushkin’s first poetic work in what is now known as Russian. [9] Therefore, the Greco-Roman past in Slavonic Church texts exist in continuity with later prominent linguistical incorporations.

Outside of religious texts, Greek translations into Slavonic have also had an impact on the historical accounts found in Old Slavonic archives. This way, the case of *The Jewish War,* written by Josephus around 75-79 AD, and translated into Slavonic presumably sometime in the 11th-12th century, [10] presents us with a detailed account of the Jewish rebellion between 67-73 AD. However, the scope of the literary texts is broadened by mentions of the Roman contemporary affairs, including mentions of how Vindex’ revolt against Emperor Nero stood behind Vespasian’s intentions to end the Jewish War quicker, being the commander of the local Roman legions at the time. [11] The translation of such an account signifies an existent interest within the Eastern Slavic community – here, meaning only the higher classes who could read them – for the historical annals of the Greco-Roman past. The knowledge of Roman monarchs also intertwines with Rurik’s claim of descent from Prus, a brother of Augustus; [12] both lay a strong foundation for Tsar Peter the Great’s later appropriation of classical imagery in the 18th century, when the mass importation of classical antiquity signalled for a more artificial and abrupt shift in the construction of the Slavic identity. [13]

On a social level, the common populace has also left evidence of classical knowledge. In this proof, primarily preserved through oral traditions and later recorded as Slavic folktales, one can observe descriptions and storylines calling back to known Greek myths. The case of Likho, the Slavic embodiment of bad luck, presents us with the physical description of a cyclops; the way to fight it alludes to Odysseus’ victory against Polyphemus, blinding the evil foe to escape fate. [14] Likewise, Dobrynia Nikitich and Marinka’s tale can be associated with the story of Circe, here, Marinka playing the role of a ‘wife-witch’. [15] The creature Alkonost can be tracked through different sources: associated with the Greek ἀλκυών, ‘kingfisher’, this half-woman, half-bird’s described behaviour has been identified with Aristotle’s and Pliny’s accounts on the kingfisher’s natural routine; [16] more so, the myth of Halcyone, transformed into a kingfisher after throwing herself into the sea, also bears great similarities to the female nature and breed choice for this sea creature. [17] The Slavic folklore, transformed by Christian and foreign influences, shows to have adapted to the multi-cultural input of trade and migration: even on general levels, the Slavic society never lost its connection to the Greco-Roman past.

In conclusion, the case of Eastern Slavic reception, presented through a simple overview of Slavic, mostly Ukrainian, evidence, argues for the beneficial impact of this foreign tradition if included in reception studies. While perceived as something alien to the euro-centric focus of Western research, the Eastern Slavic culture is, in fact, another descendant with a claim on the ancient legacy, one whose continuous reception can broaden, diversify, and enrich the variety of examples already present in the field.

**Data Availability Statement:** The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the listed bibliography.

**Notes:**

1. Modern academia presents a research tendency that is mostly concerned with later periods of Slavic reception, namely the 17th century onwards, while only brief mentions are dedicated to earlier periods. See Torlone 2014: 2-5, Kalb 2017: 470; Knabe 2000 takes the 14th-15th centuries as a starting point, while Egunov 1964 only dedicates part of Chapter 1 to earlier Homeric mentions.
2. For a discussion on the separation of ethnical and cultural material evidence found in such colonies, see Antonaccio 2003.
3. Hind 1992-1993: 91. The vases are now preserved as part of Odessa’s Archaeological Museum collection: <http://archaeology.odessa.ua/eng/struktura/drevnyaya-greciya/3>.
4. As reported by Hind 1992-1993: 91 and Bilde et al 2007-2008: 129.
5. Terentyeva 1997: 6.
6. Mesherskyy 1958: 58.
7. *Life of Constantine*, 228; *Great Menaion Reader: Life of Catherine*, 24th of November; *Great Menaion Reader: Life of Eustratius,* 13th of December.
8. Egunov 1964: 12.
9. Gukovskyy 1962, 102; Knabe 2000, 113.
10. Tvorogov 1988, *История Иудейской Войны* Иосифа Флавия.
11. Josephus 4.8.1.
12. Knabe 2000: 100; Wortman 1995: 26.
13. Kalb 2017: 452; Knabe 2000: 104.
14. Ivanov and Toporov 1990: 314; Brockhaus and Efron 1896:851.
15. *Old Russian poetry* ed.1977: number 9; Sumtsova 1892 (2-3): 161.
16. Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* 5.7.2; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 2.47.76-77. Belova 2002: 20.
17. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.410ff.; Tolstoi 1995: 100.

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