

SEARCHING FOR RURIK: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE USE OF THE FRANKISH ANNALS IN THE WRITING OF EARLY RUSSIAN HISTORY

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Historians of early Russia have always been troubled by the uniqueness of their earliest source, *The Russian Primary Chronicle* [*Povest Vremennikh Let*] (PVL). Dates after 972 AD are accepted as reasonably correct, but earlier dates are questioned. Pritsak even writes that nearly all of the "dates of early Rus' history... until 972... are fictitious 'learned' constructs devised by the clever abbot Silvester."¹ This shaky chronology puts the earliest events related in the PVL in doubt.

Some of the earliest purely Russian events in the PVL center on the 'calling of the Varangians' and the alleged foundation of the Russian state by Rurik in the ninth century. Certain Slavic and Finnic tribes are said to have sent overseas to the Varangian Russians and asked three brothers, including Rurik, to come and rule over them. Rurik, bringing all the Russians with him, settled in Novgorod in 856 and assumed sole authority when his brothers died two years later. He assigned governors over the cities of Polotsk, Rostov and Beloozero and gave permission to two of his liegemen, Askold and Dir, to emigrate to Constantinople with their families. On his deathbed, Rurik bequeathed his dominions to a kinsman named Oleg as trustee for his young son, Igor.² And this is all that the PVL tells us about Rurik. No heroic deeds, no descent from Odin, he seems like a cardboard figure created only to serve as founder of the Rurikid dynasty.

The need to reevaluate the "calling of the Varangians" is suggested by both old and new information.

The date of their arrival connects Russian history with the earliest mention of Russians in Byzantine history (i.e. the Russian raid on Constantinople in 860). The author of these passages was unaware that *The Annals of St.-Bertin* mention Russians in 839. He probably distorts events or places Rurik's arrival too early. Recent archaeological excavations in Novgorod show the town was not founded before 900.³ Other archaeological evidence shows that Rurik might have settled in Rurik Gorodishche, near but not in medieval Novgorod. This settlement was founded no later than 850⁴ and, as its name suggests, it has been traditionally identified as Rurik's seat.

We cannot rely on the archaeologists, however, to find the sorts of things we would like to know about Rurik. Was he real? Is the PVL account of his origins and time of arrival correct? The less skeptical historians of an earlier generation earnestly sought to verify the PVL accounts by finding external, non-Russian documents. George Vernadsky, for example, was convinced that Friedrich Kruse's and N. T. Belaiev's surveys of Western sources had correctly identified Rurik as Roric of Jutland.⁵ This identification, if it were correct, would support the PVL version of history, but would not resolve the problem that Russians were known as early as 839.

Belaiev claims that Roric of Jutland was born about 800 and grew up during dynastic strife in Denmark.⁶ In 826 Roric's older brother, Harald and much of his clan, the Skioldings, were baptized at Ingelheim. Harald received Rustringen in Frisia [roughly modern East Frisia in Germany on the North Sea coast adjacent to the border with the Netherlands] as a fief from Louis the Pious. Roric ruled Rustringen together with his brother, Harald, and inherited it when Harald died. Lothaire took it away from Roric sometime after 843. Thereafter, Roric led an adventurous life becoming a pirate. Belaiev notes that this phase of his

career coincides with raids on the Elbe, England and Frisia. He even claims that Roric was "the organizer of all the principal [Viking] raids during the decade immediately preceding the coming of the Northmen to Russia" (i.e. 840-850).⁷

Lothaire returned Rustringen to Roric in 850, but deprived him of it again in 855. Belaiev correctly cites *The Annals of Fulda* for his claim that Roric "occupied the part of the kingdom [of the Danes - author] which lies between the sea and the Eider with the consent of Horic, king of the Danes,"⁸ but omits mentioning the date which was 857. [Remember that Rurik was supposed to have arrived in Russia in 856 according to the *PVL*.]

Belaiev ceases using the Frankish annals at this point and suggests that Roric left western Europe, blandly saying that "the identification of Roric of Jutland and of Rurik of Russia almost suggests itself to one in this light."⁹ Roric set out for Russia in 855 or 856 from his base in Jutland staying about thirteen years. Belaiev writes that

Russian chronicles do not tell us much of the late years of Rurik; neither do the Frankish annals. Still, there is an interesting entry... under the year 873.... Roric and his nephew Rodulf paid a visit to Charles the Bald. They parted on most friendly terms... The Emperor returned to Roric all his fiefs.... His life work is accomplished, and after that year we hear no more of Roric.¹⁰

Belaiev's complete account of Roric is an imaginative - some might say imaginary - and far-reaching account of a mighty ruler. It contradicts the *PVL* in that Rurik does not die, disappearing instead. This omits much of Belaiev's account, but then Belaiev also omits much and

I am not the first to think so. Baron Michael de Taube disagreed with Belaiev's identification of Roric as Rurik.¹¹ De Taube's critique is not readily available so I have relied solely on contemporary accounts.

Belaiev makes little use of some Frankish chronicles which have been recently translated into English. These include *The Royal Frankish Annals* covering the period from 741 to 829, *Nithard's Histories* from 829 to 843, *The Annals of St.-Bertin* from 830 to 882, and *The Annals of Fulda* from 838 to 901.

*The Royal Frankish Annals*¹² do not mention Roric at all, but contain several illuminating entries about Harald. Belaiev's account of Harald's ancestry and baptism is confirmed, but much more detail is included. It is said that "Harald came with his wife and a great number of Danes and was baptized at St. Albans in Mainz" in 826. Louis gave him Rustringen "so that he would be able to find refuge there with his possessions if he were ever in danger."

This was a providential gift because the Ynglings "deprived Harald of his share in the kingship and forced him to leave" in 827. Louis arranged for negotiations between Harald and his opponents in 828, but Harald "was too thirsty for action. He broke the peace that had been agreed upon and confirmed by hostages, and burned and pillaged some small villages of the Norsemen." The Ynglings (sons of Godefrid) prevailed in the ensuing conflict during the same year and this is the last mention of Harald in *The Royal Frankish Annals*.

The Annals of St.-Bertin criticize Lothaire for adding the island of Walcheren and neighboring areas (the southernmost area of the modern Netherlands in the delta of the Scheldt) to Harald's holdings in 841.¹³ This is the only mention of him in those annals. *Nithard's Histories* tell us that Lothaire ordered Harald to guard a crossing of the Moselle along with Bishop Orgar of Mainz and Count Hatto

in 842, but all three of them fled at the approach of Louis and Charles.¹⁴ The date of Harald's death is not mentioned in any of the Frankish annals, but he would have been at least 50 to 60 years old in 842.

Belaiev identifies Roric as the son of a Danish king and the brother of Harald. Is this identification correct? Both *The Annals of Fulda* and *The Annals of St.-Bertin* first mention Roric in 850. They read respectively:

Roric the Northman held the vicus Dorestad... with his **brother** Harald in the time of the emperor Louis. After the deaths of the emperor and his own brother he was denounced as a traitor - falsely as it is said - to Lothaire... was captured and imprisoned. He escaped and became the man of Louis, king of the eastern Franks. After he had stayed there for some years... he collected a not insubstantial force of Danes and began a career of piracy, attacking places near the northern coast of Lothaire's kingdom by the North Sea. He came to Dorestad, seized and held it. Because the emperor Lothaire was unable to drive him out... Roric was received back into fealty... (*Annals of Fulda*)

Roric, the **nephew** of Harald... raised whole armies of Northmen with a vast number of ships and laid waste Frisia... Lothaire, since he could not crush Roric, received him into his allegiance and granted him Dorestad and other counties. (*Annals of St.-Bertin*)

The differences between these two texts highlight the regional nature of the later Frankish annals. *The Annals*

of *Fulda* were written for and about the eastern Franks; *The Annals of St.-Bertin* for and about the western Franks. Keeping in mind that Frisia was initially a part of Lothringia and later a part of the western Frankish kingdom before its final annexation by the eastern Franks, it is not surprising that *The Annals of St.-Bertin* are a rich source of information on Frisia which the historians of the Vikings and of Frisia have not always remembered in identifying appropriate primary documents.

Nevertheless, everything in these two accounts can be reconciled with one exception. The point at issue: Was Roric Harald's **brother** or his **nephew**? Let's look at the mathematics involved. Harald is first mentioned 38 years before the first mention of Roric. Harald had to have been born no later than about 790 since he and his brother, Reginfrid, led his clan, the Skioldings, in their strife with the Ynglings from 812 on. Roric was of another generation. Brother or nephew, Roric was at least twenty to thirty years younger than Harald. He was probably born about 820, but certainly no earlier than about 810 when Harald's father died. It is, therefore, likely that Roric's father was one of Harald's brothers, three of whom (Anulo,¹⁵ Reginfrid and Hemming) are mentioned in *The Royal Frankish Annals*. Whether Roric was brother or nephew is not material to identifying him as the Rurik of the *PVL*. In fact, a younger and more vigorous Rurik makes more sense than an old and surely tired Rurik.

How much of the rest of Belaiev's account can be squared with *The Annals of St.-Bertin*? Did Roric inherit Rustringen from Harald? Did he acquire a fief in Jutland in 854? Did he perhaps disappear between the years 855 and 869? "Godefrid, **son** of Harald the Dane, who had once been baptized at Mainz in the Emperor Louis' time, now defected from Lothaire... and attacked Frisia..." in 852. Roric was not Harald's nearest surviving kinsman. Was

Godefrid the "rightful" heir to Rustringen? In 853 "Charles got Godefrid to make peace with him on certain agreed conditions." The conditions of this peace are not specified, but we can safely infer that a share of Frisia was one of them.

In 855, it is reported that "Lothaire gave the whole of Frisia to his son, Lothaire, whereupon Roric and Godefrid headed back to their native Denmark in the hope of gaining royal power." Later in that same year, "Roric and Godefrid on whom success had not smiled, remained based at Dorestad and held sway over most of Frisia." Neither Roric nor Godefrid was able to hold on to possessions in Jutland. *The Annals of Fulda* either err on this point or relate to a different event in 857.

The Lothaire who had given Frisia to his son, Lothaire, died on 29 September 855, that same year. So Roric and Godefrid were able to return home from Denmark after their defeat, having heard of the elder Lothaire's death. They resumed their fiefs under his son as *The Annals of St.-Bertin* indicate. Roric is next mentioned in 863 when we learn that

In January Danes sailed up the Rhine toward Cologne, after sacking the emporium called Dorestad... then they reached a certain island... and they encamped there until about the beginning of April [under siege by the Saxons and Lothaire II - author] The Danes therefore followed Roric's advice and withdrew...

Roric was not with the Danish raiding party since very few feudal lords were in the habit of raising armies and fleets and invading their own peaceful possessions. Roric was simply sitting in Dorestad, minding the store when the

Danish raiders arrived, lacked sufficient forces to repel them on his own and was probably happy to negotiate their withdrawal for Lothaire.

The Frisians must have resented Roric's inability to defend them for we next learn that Lothaire II expected "Roric, whom the local people... had driven out of Frisia, would return bringing some Danes to help him" in 867. Lothaire II died on 8 August 869. Frisia was then claimed by Charles the Bald who "went to the palace at Nijmegen to hold discussions with the Northman Roric, whom he bound to himself by a treaty" in 870.¹⁶ The only reasonable inference is that they agreed to continue essentially the same relationship that Roric had had with Lothaire II.

The last entries in *The Annals of St.-Bertin* dealing with Roric's career are for the year 872. We learn that "on January 19, Charles left Compiègne and went to Moustier-sur-Sambre to hold talks with the Northmen Roric and Rodulf."¹⁷ Charles met with both of them again in October:

He held talks with the Northmen Roric and Rodulf who had come up river to meet him [at Maastricht - author]. He gave a gracious reception to Roric who had proved loyal to him but Rodulf he dismissed empty-handed because he had been plotting acts of treachery and pitching his demands too high.

This does not much resemble the friendly conversation that Belaiev describes. The annals are silent as to Roric's reaction and we do not know whether that gracious reception included anything of material value. Rodulf was clearly infuriated. He rebelled and the next mention of him is in 873 when reliable news is said to have reached Charles that "Rodulf with 500 and more of his

accomplices" had been slain.

Roric himself is mentioned one last time in *The Annals of St.-Bertin* under the year 882. Godefrid, the son of Roric's cousin Godefrid, and a fierce character himself, "would be baptized and would then receive Frisia and the other regions that Roric once held." Did Roric receive other lands from Charles? Had he simply disappeared, seeking his fortune beyond the Baltic?

Or, had he taken possession of a different kind of fief? He was about sixty years old in 873 and surely died within a few years of his meeting with Charles.

Belaiev's identification of Roric is erroneous. The Frankish annals provide clearcut evidence that Roric was present in western Europe in the years 857, 863, 867, 870 and 872. The fact that he is not mentioned in *The Annals of Fulda* between 857 and 873 is not proof that he disappeared for a time into the East, as Belaiev would have us believe. It merely means that Roric was mostly busy with Frisian affairs in the Western Frankish kingdom in those years. What we know of his life in those years consists of those events recorded by the Western Frankish chroniclers.

The Rurik of the Russian chronicles was either some other Roric not known from the Frankish annals or he was a mythical founder of the Rurikids, the dynasty which ruled Russia for seven hundred years. Much as one would like to think that a son, nephew or cousin of Roric was the 'real' Rurik, there is no hard evidence to support this notion.

The Viking period of Frisian history came to an end towards the end of the ninth century. *The Annals of Fulda* tell us that Godefrid, Roric's nephew and successor,

was invited to a meeting [in 885] by Henry and other faithful men of the emperor and accused of treason... he was killed, along with all who were with him. God gave him

the due reward for his treachery.

According to Boeles' history of Frisia, Godefrid was its last Viking prince. With his death, Viking rule came to an end.¹⁸ But, did all of the Skioldings attend that unlucky meeting with Henry? Surely there were some survivors. Where did they go? Surely back to Denmark. And from there.... To Russia? To Ryurik Gorodische?