



Summary :

The name Rus', used in Byzantine texts to refer to the early Russians, is a direct reflection of their self-definement. The participation and the influence of Rus' in the political and economical issues of the Black Sea area, which happened around the same time as the consolidation and ascendance of the Kiev's hegemony, lasted from the 9th century until the beginning of the 13th, at which point the expansion of the Mongols led to the fall of Kiev's hegemony and the submission of the Russian people to the Mongolian authority.

Date

9th - 13th century

Geographical Location

North Black Sea area

Names

Russians

1. Name and Birth of the Nation

The name Rus was initially used to refer to Scandinavian populations that fled east and southeast of the Scandinavian Peninsula, in Eastern Europe (present day Russia and Ukraine) during the 9th century, where they founded the hegemonies of Novgorod to the north and Kiev to the south, after having submitted the local Slavic populations. The Rus' of Kiev's hegemony were to have an important role in the affairs of the north Black Sea region and to create many-sided relations to Byzantium.

The birth of the Russian nation, which took place in these hegemonies, bears strong resemblance to that of Bulgaria. The Scandinavian Rus conquerors initially differed ethnologically to the submitted Slavs, who were exceeding in population, yet the coexistence of Scandinavians and Slavs created assimilating forces, that –taking into consideration the larger number of Slavs– led to the gradual slavication of the Rus'; the last giving their name to the Slavic Russian ethnicity that emerged from this assimilating process.¹ Around the middle and during the second half of the 10th century, the Rus' were still a discernible entity among the Slavic populations of the Kiev's hegemony, as Constantine Porphyrogenitus reveals, who made out a list of names of the Slavic tribes that were submitted to the Rus'². The Scandinavian descent of the latter is also stated indirectly in the Byzantine sources about the Rus', who were, since the ending of the 10th century, serving as mercenaries in the Byzantine army and were moreover part of the imperial guard ([Varangian Guard](#)). Yet the assimilating process seems to have already been in progress in the second half of the 10th century, as the names of Kiev's sovereigns indicate, since Oleg and Igor, who had Scandinavian names, were succeeded by Sviatoslav and Vladimir, whose names were Slavic. The assimilation of the Rus' from the Slavs must have been strengthened by the [adoption of Christianity](#) in Kiev –which was initiated in 988– since common religion played a unifying role.

2. Presence and Activity of the Rus' in the North Black Sea Region

The Rus' were involved in the commerce activities in the north Black Sea region, while trying to impose their rule in political and military matters against the other powers that controlled parts of the larger area. The Rus' had not succeeded in prevailing on the steppes that spread between Kiev and the north shore of the Black Sea, which were generally controlled by nomadic tribes, the [Pechenegs](#) and the [Cumans](#) after that. This made the commercial relations with the ports of the Black Sea and [Constantinople](#) more difficult, as they had to sail through the rivers Dnieper and Dniester.³

The Rus' strong leanings towards trade had to have become clear since the migration period, which happened through important river trade routes in the north, and their original settling in the Eastern Europe area. From their first encounter with the Byzantine Empire (that took place during a fierce attack in the outskirts of Constantinople in 860) their interest in forming commercial relations with



Byzantium became clear. The purpose of even the later conflicts of the two forces, that sporadically disturbed their generally peaceful relations (Russian attacks in Constantinople in the years 907, 941, 1043, temporary conquest of Cherson in 988), was the improvement of the terms of Rus' commercial activity in the Byzantine dominion.⁴ Soon after their migration and the foundation of Kiev's hegemony, Rus' turned into a significant power in the northern trade and also into important trade partners for the Byzantines and the Arabs. These commercial contacts between the Rus' and the Byzantines took place in the [under Byzantine dominance cities](#) of the [Crimean peninsula](#) (Cherson, Sougdaia, [Theodosia](#))⁵ and in [Constantinople](#) itself, where they sailed in their dugouts following the route of the rivers Dnieper and Dniester, and then sailing by shores of the Black Sea.⁶

3. Relations of the Byzantine Empire with Kiev's Hegemony

The relations of the Byzantine Empire with Kiev's hegemony were, from the Russian part, a matter of commercial facilitations, while from the Byzantine part it was a matter of retaining [balance between the power](#) of the different forces of the north Black Sea region (Rus', Pechenegs, [Bulgars](#), [Khazars](#), Magyars), so that they would avoid the inordinate gain of power for one of them to a point where it could pose a threat to the safety of Byzantium.⁷ This geopolitical system and at the same time the delicate relations of the Byzantine Empire with the Russian hegemony of Kiev, could be disrupted by the aspiration of the Rus' to spread their dominance in the larger Black Sea region, as it became vividly clear during the reign of the sovereign Sviatoslav, when the Rus' succeeded in destroying the Khazar kingdom and to temporarily conquer Bulgaria. The victory of the Byzantines in the large-scale war that followed restored the balance, which was later on secured with the match of the sovereign Vladimir to a Byzantine wife (988) and the adoption of Christianity by the Rus', who were now under the sphere of Byzantine influence from a religious and cultural point of view.

The signs of Russian presence in the Black Sea area became more and more evident in the framework that had been formed until the late 10th century and during the next centuries (11th and 12th) as well: strong commerce presence and actions, exertion of political influence and sporadically of political-military dominance against the nomadic tribes (Pechenegs, Cumans). The raids of the Mongols in the first half of the 13th century, which led to the fall of Kiev's hegemony, imposed the Mongolian prevalence in the Black Sea region and annihilated the former political and military primacy of the Rus'. The movement of the Russian state formation to the north, in Moscow, meant that, centuries later, the Russians would not play a role in political matters nor in the fight for prevalence in the Black Sea area. Nevertheless, their presence among the main ethnicities of the area was undoubtable, since the name Russian had in time become a synonym for the Slavic populations of the larger area.

1. The birth of the Bulgarian people took place in the same way. In that case the Slavic populations in the northeast Balkans assimilated the Asian Turkic-born tribe of the Bulgars, who had conquered them in the first place.

2. Moravcsik, G. (ed.), Jenkins, R.J.H. (engl. transl.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington, D.C. 1967), p. 62.

3. Moravcsik, G. (ed.), Jenkins, R.J.H. (engl. transl.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington, D.C. 1967), pp. 56-62.

4. Obolensky, D., *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500-1453* [London 1974 (1971)], pp. 238-247, 293-294.

5. Νυσταζοπούλου, Μ. *Η εν τη Ταυρική Χερσονήσω πόλις Σουγδαία από του ΙΓ' μέχρι του ΙΕ' αιώνος. Συμβολή εις την ιστορίαν του μεσαιωνικού ελληνισμού της νοτίου Ρωσίας* (Αθήναι 1965), p. 72.

6. Moravcsik, G. (ed.), Jenkins, R.J.H. (engl. transl.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington, D.C. 1967), pp. 56-62, 186.



7. Moravcsik, G. (ed.), Jenkins, R.J.H. (engl. transl.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington, D.C. 1967), pp. 48-52.

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