SOME ASPECTS OF THE RUSSIAN PILGRIMAGE TO THE MEDITERRANEAN SACRED PLACES

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I. Sacred Geography

> ... On the third day (after the departure from Cyprus ... Y. N.) we saw the Israelite mountains, the Promised Land, Holy Palestine. Oh, with what ineffable joy were all of us filled! There were about 100 people on the ship, all of us, men and women, shed tears of joy. Small children jumped and leaped and clapped their hands, crying loudly, "Oh, the Holy Land, the Holy Land!"[1]

These lines were written by a Russian pilgrim who visited Jerusalem in 1845. The author was a monk, Parfeny by name, but there is no doubt that such sincere yearning for that sacred place was shared by all the Russian pilgrims, clerical or lay.

For the Russians of the pre-revolutionary era each stone, each leaf of the Holy Land was heavily invested with ancient legends. It might be said that Biblical knowledge, canonical and apocryphal, was an integral part of the education of an Orthodox Russian. In 1898, half a century after Parfeny (during which time the number of Russian pilgrims increased from 400 a year to 5000[2]), three Cossacks from the Ural, on their way to the Far East in search of the utopia *Belovod'e* (White Water Land), made pilgrimage to the Mediterranean sacred places. One of them, Khokhlov, on route by ship from Beirut to Sidon, recalled to mind how the town of Sidon had been founded by a son of Canaan of that name, how Hiram, the king of Tyre, in response to a request by Solomon, had sent skillful artisans from Sidon to Jerusalem to help erect the temple there, how King Nebuchadnezzar had devastated both Sidon and Jerusalem, and how the town had fallen into the hands of Romans in 66 B.C. and later taken by the Saracens in 636 A.D. — all of which we can read in the Cossack's diary.[3] His memory and recollections were stirred by every town and

1 Monk Parfeny, *Skazanie o stranstvii i puteschestvii po Rossii, Moldavii, Turtsii i Svjatoj zemle,* 4, 2nd ed., Moscow, 1856, p. 4.

2 *Entsiklopedicheskij slovar'*, Brockhaus and Efron, vol. 22-a, SPb., 1897, p. 645.

3 G.T. Khokhlov, *Puteshestivie ural'skikh kazakov v "Belovodskoe tsarstvo"* (Transactions of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, the Department of Ethnography, vol. 28, No.1), SPb., 1903, pp. 43-44.

village of Palestine, by each of the remnants of Christianity. His almost inexhaustible erudition concerning the history of the Holy Land presents a striking contrast to the naïveté with which he and his fellow Cossacks identified the *Belovod'e* with Japan. They had left their native land to verify a fantastic rumor that the purest Christian faith had been preserved intact in the Far Eastern island country. It was only at the end of their long journey that they came to the disappointing conclusion that the true faith now existed only high above, in heaven. Khokhlov's diary is valuable, moreover, in giving us the interesting information that at that time there were three lodgings (Panteleimon, Il'in and Andreev) for Russian pilgrims in Constantinople, and a free rest house in Jerusalem.[4]

The Ural Cossacks, like the monk Parfeny, had visited Athos before Palestine. The holy Mount Athos had become for Russians, along with Palestine, one of the sacred places nearest to heaven. Since the time of Anthony, the founder of the celebrated Kievan Pechersky Laura, who had been tonsured and had practiced austerities there, Mount Athos continuously attracted monks from Russia, with the result that by the end of the nineteenth century the monastery of St. Panteleimon which was called *roussikon* and the skete of St. Andrew, a dependency of the monastery of Vatopedi, had grown into the architectural colossi they are now.[5]

Egypt was also included in the circuit of the Russian pilgrims. Khokhlov writes in his journal that the Russian steamer the Cossacks boarded in Yaffa was carrying some 50 Russian passengers, all of them pilgrims, bound for Alexandria.[6] Varsonofy, a clergyman from West Russia, went to Egypt for the first time in the middle of the fifteenth century and from that time on devout Russians never ceased to frequent the famous places connected with the history of Christian piety.

Popular guidebooks for Russian pilgrims usually contained descriptions of the islands and towns on a route from Constantinople to Yaffa, the seaport of Jerusalem, and of Greek sites such as Thessalonica, Athens and Athos, the Egyptian towns of Alexandria, Cairo and Port Said, and of course, detailed descriptions of the Holy Land—Palestine.[7]

The only area of pilgrimage for Orthodox Russians outside the boundary of Russia was the eastern Mediterranean.[8]

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 48.

5 These magnificient buildings stand deserted and desolate now. As of October 1986, only 17 Russians live in the monastery of St. Panteleimon which at the beginning of the twentieth century was inhabited by 2000 monks from Russia. See E. Matsuki, "My Expedition to St. Panteleimon", *Mado,* No. 60, Tokyo, 1987, pp. 2-9. When I visited Karies, he capital of the monastic state of Athos in 1986, the imposing but decrepit chapel and huge lodging houses of the skete of St. Andrew, donated by the Russian tsar, were guarded by one old Greek watchman.

6 G. T. Khokhlov, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

7 For example, Bishop Arseny, *Svjatoj grad Ierusalim i drugie svjatye mesta Palestiny s ukazaniem na vazhnejshie istoricheskie mestnosti ee,* SPb., 1896.

8 Also, Bari, a town in southern Italy, must have been visited by Russian pilgrims, although rarely,

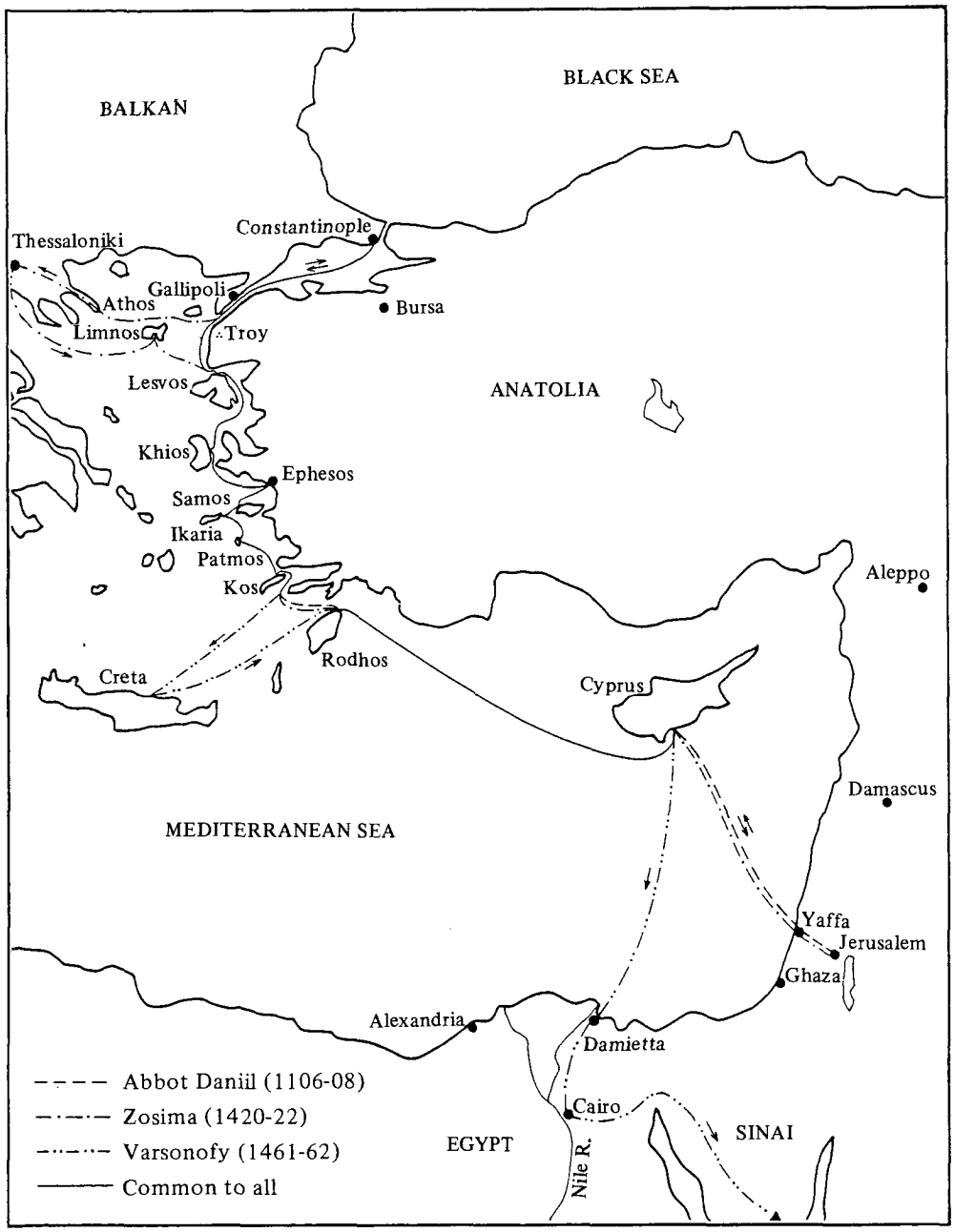

Figure 1 Maritime Routes of the Russian Pilgrims (Supposed)

because relics of St. Nicolas are preserved there. Moreover, Belaja Krinitsa, formerly in the domain of the Austrian Empire (now part of the Ukraine), had a special significance for Russian Old Believers, since the bishopric of their sect was established here in the 1840s.

II. Routes

It is well known that Russian pilgrims left many interesting documents, among which the accounts of abbot Daniil's travel to the Holy Land come first both in chronology and importance.[9] Apart from the detailed description of Palestine where the abbot stayed for sixteen months in 1106-08, he records scrupulously his itinerary from Constantinople to Yaffa, even citing the distances from one anchorage to another. Presumably, he intended to compile a handbook for the coming generations of his compatriot pilgrims.

As Daniil perhaps anticipated, the maritime route, threading through the Aegean islands and the coastal towns of western Anatolia, became the standard course of the Russian pilgrimage. There were two variants of the sea routes: 1) making a detour to Mount Athos and/or Thessalonica (or Salonica, as Russians called it) immediately after passing through the Sea of Marmara, or 2) going to Egypt before or after visiting Palestine. Zosima, monastic priest from Moscow, is known to have chosen the first variant, making a journey to Athos on his way to the Holy Land in the 1420s. Deeply impressed by the solemn atmosphere of the sacred mountain, he listed all the monasteries there, 22 in number.[10] The second variant was first taken by Varsonofy who, as mentioned above, went first to Cairo from whence he proceeded to Jerusalem, making a detour to Mount Siani.

There were inland routes, too. In the 1460s, a merchant named Vasily, starting eastward from Bursa close to the Sea of Marmara, crossed all Anatolia and reached Palestine via Aleppo and Damascus. He returned to Bursa also inland but by another route. In the 1630s another Vasily, a merchant of Kazan, setting out from Tiflis in Georgia, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, passing through Erevan, Erzurum, Aleppo and Damascus. It is noteworthy that these Vasilies were both merchants by trade and that they both kept diaries in which they wrote careful observations concerning the bigger towns they passed on the way. It may be supposed that they had in mind commercial purposes apart from the religious one. The two merchants went as far as Egypt, perhaps not without reason.

A remarkable exception was the case of Arseny Sukhanov, an ecclesiastic literary man of the mid-seventeenth century, who travelled to Palestine by sea but returned to Moscow via Asia Minor, Armenia, Persia and the Caucasus.

9 The most exhaustive study of Russian pilgrim literature from its beginning down to the first years of the eighteenth century is K.-D. Seemann, *Die Altrussische Wallfahrtsliteratur. Theorie und Geschichte eines Literarischen Genres,* Munich, 1976. Abbot Daniil begins the description of his route to the Holy Land from Constantinople. There were, of course, many different routes from Russia to Constantinople, the popularity of which changed from time to time. See M. N. Tikhomirov, "Puti iz Rossii v Vizantiju v XIV-XV vv.", in *Istoricheskie svjazi Rossii so slavjanskimi stranami i Vizantiej,* Moscow, 1969, pp. 48-77, G. P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,* Washington D.C., 1984.

10 At present the monasteries on Athos number twenty.

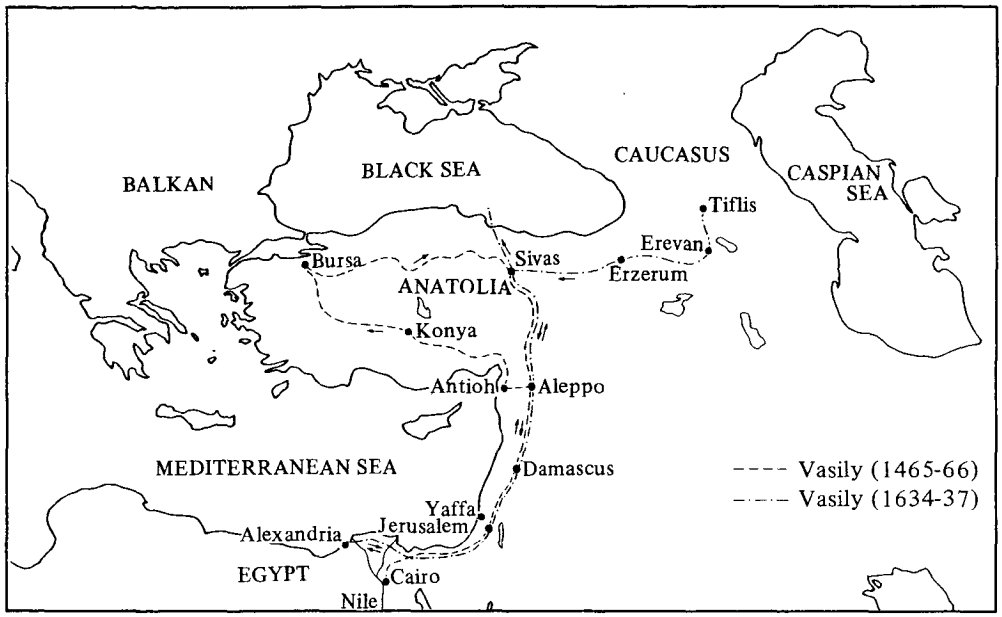

Figure 2 Inland Routes of the Russian Pilgrims (Supposed)

Probably, he was commissioned to make some kind of survey of religious circumstances in those foreign countries. It deserves special emphasis that he was engaged in the revision of the prayer book of the Russian Orthodox Church and that his journey took place on the eve of Nikon's church reform. Unfortunately, documents of pilgrimage seem never to reveal the innermost mission of the pilgrim.

No route of pilgrimage, sea or land, was safe from dangers of various kinds. A few examples should suffice to give a glimpse of the real conditions of these medieval journies. The above-mentioned Zosima describes in an artless style how he was overtaken by pirates on the way home from the Holy Land:

> . . . Midway across, a band of Catalanese brigands delivered an attack upon our ship. They battered the ship with cannons and then leaped into it like wild beasts. They cut our captain into pieces, threw him into the sea and captured our ship. One of them struck me, the wretched, on the breast with the shaft of a lance, demanding "*Kalugene, pone ducata korsa*" (Monk, give me money). I swore by God that I had none. Then they took away all my possessions, leaving me, the wretched, in only a homespun caftan.[11]

11 "Khozhenie Zosimy v Tsar'grad, Afon i Palestinu", in N. I. Prokof'ev (ed.), *Kniga khozhenij. Zapiski russkikh puteshestvennikov XI-XV vv.*, pp. 134-135.

Even in the eighteen century the highway from the seaport to Jerusalem was haunted with robbers. The following passage are from the diary of Luk'janov, an Old Believer priest of Moscow, who walked that road in 1702.

> ... When we left Ramla for the Holy town of Jerusalem, we formed a caravan consisting of 1500 people of different faiths. Soon Arabs began to attack and rob us. Swarming like bees, they plucked at our garments, pushed us around, dragged us down from our horses. Crying "Give money, give money", some struck us with cudgels, while others poked their hands into our breasts. Giving money or refusing it brought the same trouble. If someone took our a pouch, it was at once snatched away. If someone refused to give money, they hit him and did not let him go until they got money. They were as difficult to repulse as dogs would have been. Shouts and moans were heard everywhere.[12]

It goes without saying that the inland routes through the mountains and deserts of Asia Minor exposed travellers to no less dangers, and natural disasters were an added terror.

III. Pilgrimage in Folk Epos

The Mediterranean sacred places were familiar to the common people of Russia more by dint of the religious verses and folk epos called *bylina* than owing to the literary documents of pilgrims. Russians also usually acquired their extensive knowledge of Biblical happenings, old and new testament, as well as of the exploits of Christian saints and martyrs, through the religious verses which wandering blind beggars used to sing as they begged for alms from door to door. The Russian term for these people was *kaliki* or *kaleki.* In modern Russian this word means physically handicapped persons, but in earlier times it was one of the words for pilgrims along with *stranniki* (wanderers), *palomniki* (palm bearers), and of course *pilgrimy.*

Oral folk literature provides us with interesting facts concerning the practice of pilgrimage in Old Russia.

"Forty Pilgrims and One"

This piece is thought to straddle the boundary between *bylinas* and religious verses. The best text is found in the oldest collection of *bylinas* which bears the name of the compiler Kirsha Danilov (18th century). It begins like this:

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12 "Puteshestvie v svjatuju zemlju svjashchennika Luk'janova", *Pusskij arkhiv,* 1863, No. 1, p. 248.

From the wilderness of Efim'ev
From the monastery of Bogoljubov,
The *kaliki* began to prepare
For the holy town of Jerusalem,
Forty *kaliki* and one
Formed a single circle,
One single thought they thought,
One single important thought.
They chose a great *ataman,*
The young Kas'jan Mikhajlovich,
The young Kas'jan Mikhajlovich
Addressed this great vow
To all the fine young men ...[13]

The vow stipulated that anyone of them who stole or lied or indulged in fornication on the way to Jerusalem and was discovered would be left alone in a field, buried in the damp earth to his neck.[14]

A. N. Pypin, the author of a once popular history of Russian literature, and V. F. Miller, a Russian folklorist of the nineteenth century, asserted that this *bylina* was related in some way to an entry dated 1163 in a Russian chronicle about forty Novgorodians who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and brought back some relics from Jerusalem with a blessing of the patriarch.[15] And in fact, there is historical foundation for this story. What is most interesting is that before leaving for Jerusalem the pilgrims organized a *krug* (circle) or selfgoverning body and agreed upon a "great vow" in order to maintain a high standard of morality among themselves.[16] Historically the *krug* of the Don Cossacks, a general assembly of all the men aged 18 and above, was their supreme legislative and juridical organ (it was called *rada* among the Zaporozh'e Cossacks of the Ukraine). Meetings were held regularly, at which time the *ataman* (leader) and his *esaul* (assistant) were chosen and all important matters were discussed and decided.

In the *bylina,* Kas'jan, the *ataman,* falls out of favor of the Princess of Kiev because of his chastity and, falsely accused of stealing a silver chalice, is

13 A.P. Evgen'eva and B.N. Putilov, *Drevnie rossijskie stikhotvorenija, sobrannye Kirsheju Danilovym,* Moscow-Leningrad, 1958, p. 155. Some passages of *bylinas* in English translation in this paper are cited with slight modifications from A. E. Alexander, *Russian Folklore in English Translation,* Massachusetts, 1975, to which my acknowledges are due.

14 The *ataman* is not always called Kas'jan and in some variants the punishment is heavier — the sinner is to have his tongue cut and his eyes plucked out. See A. E. Gruzinsky (ed.), *Pesni, sobrannye P. N. Rybnikovym,* vol. 1, Moscow, 2nd ed., 1909, p. 324.

15 A. N. Pypin, *Istorija russkoj literatury,* vol. 1, SPb., 4th ed., 1911, p. 364 and V. F. Miller, "K byline o soroka kalikakh so kalikoju", in *Zhurnal ministerstva narodnogo prosveshchenija,* 1899, No. 8, p. 489.

16 Luk'janov calls his own group of six pilgrims an *artel'.* See Luk'janov, *op. cit.,* p. 153.

left alone on the steppe, buried in the earth up to his neck, according to the vow. His comrades continue on their way:

The pilgrims went to the town of Jerusalem,
They walked three months to get there.
They arrived in the town of Jerusalem,
They prayed before the holy shrine,
They kissed the tomb of the Lord,
They bathed in the river Jordan,
They dried themselves with the eternal chasuble,
All this the fine young men did;
They also attended a mass, a thanksgiving service
For their health and fortune,
They remembered too Kas'jan Mikhajlovich.
But all the pilgrims did not tarry,
They departed for the town of Kiev,
To the kind Prince Vladimir ...[17]

However, because the main theme of this *bylina* lies in the relation of the pilgrim hero to the Kievan court — how he was accused unjustly and how God helped him clear himself of the false charge — very little attention is paid to the route by which his forty companions went to Jerusalem and back, much less to the question of whether they passed through Constantinople or not.

"Vasily Buslaev Goes to Pray"

Another *bylina* hero who went to the Holy Land is Vasily, the son of a Novgorodian aristocrat named Buslaj. Vasily differs in many respects from Kas'jan and his forty comrades. First, he is not a chosen leader — all his thirty companions are his servants. In this regard, Vasily Buslaev is similar to such prelate as abbot Daniil of the early twelfth century. Second, he intended to pray for, among others, those whom he had killed, carried away by youthful ardor. The excellent text of this *bylina,* also contained in Kirsha Danilov's collection, runs as follows:

My trip is an unwilling one,
From youth I have attacked and plundered many,
I must save my soul for old age.[18]

Third, Vasily does not take the route via Kiev and Constantinople. His party sails down the Volga, comes out into the Caspian Sea and abruptly

17 Kirsha Danilov, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-162.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

emerges through an unknown waterway into the river Jordan. As if to rationalize this fantastic course, Vasily hires a guide from among a band of Cossacks whom he meets on an island in the Caspian Sea. Needless to say, there is no description of the route between the Caspian Sea and the Jordan. The townfolk of medieval Novgorod, an ally of the Hanseatic League, one of whose representative heroes was Sadko, a favorite of Neptune, must have been well acquainted with all the routes from Russia to the Mediterranean. The unrestrained character of naughty Vasily is expressed in his contempt for any trodden path and in his choice of an unexpected course. Indeed, the Tiflis-Palestine route was not quite impassable, though navigation was out of the question.

Having cast anchor in the river Jordan, Vasily goes to the Cathedral of Jerusalem accompanied by his followers, prays for health of his mother and himself and for the souls of his father and all his other relatives as well as for the victims of his recklessness, after which he bathes in the river Jordan.

Unlike *ataman* Kas'jan who survives by God's mercy, the arrogant Vasily ascends a Saracen mountain on the way home and, failing in an attempt to jump over a mysterious stone, loses his life.[19] Usually, a jorney to the Holy Land was thought to gurantee a happy life for the pilgrim. But to Vasily, son of Buslaj, did not apply the rule which abbot Daniil formulated thus:

> No one who has accomplished this voyage (pilgrimage . . . Y. N.) in fear of God and humility will ever commit a sin against God's mercy.[20]

Pilgrims in Other *Bylinas*

Russian *bylina* heroes, when it is necessary for them to cnceal their heroism, ordinarily disguise themselves as *skomorokhi* (wandering minstrels) or as *kaliki*, who were, it seems, the most commonplace people on the medieval roads. For example, Il'ja Muromets, the most celebrated hero of the Russian folk epos, is sung of as follows:

> Il'ja put on silken sandals,
> He shouldered his scrip of black velvet,
> And covered his head with a hood from Greece.[21]

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19 According to the text in Kirsha Danilov's collection of *bylinas*, a rectangular stone lies on the summit of a Saracon mountain, and by the stone stands a notice board, prohibiting anyone from jumping over the stone lengthwise. V. Propp supposes this stone to be a tomb. See V. Ja. Propp, *Russkij geroicheskij epos*, 2nd ed., Moscow, 1958, p. 474. There are other variants of this *bylina* in which Vasily dies from failing to jump over the stone backward or with his eyes shut.

20 G. M. Prokhorov, "Khozhenie igumena Daniila", in L. A. Dmitriev, and D. S. Likhachev (comp.), *Pamjatniki literatury drevnej Rusi. XII vek*, Moscow, 1980, p. 24.

21 P. N. Rybnikov, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 33.

According to I. I. Sreznevsky, a Russian philologist of the nineteenth century, the most typical hero-pilgrim is depicted like this:

> He put on silk-knitted sandals,
> And took a stick of fish bone,
> Then shoudered a scrip of black velvet,
> And covered his head with a hood from Greece.[22]

Sreznevsky asserts that the appearance of a medieval Russian pilgrim was in essence quite similar to that of West European pilgrims: *lopatki* (sandals) corresponds to *calcei,* a *kljuka* (stick) corresponds to a *baculus,* while a *sumochka* (scrip) is equal to a *pera* or *besace* and a *shljapa* (hood) is identified with a *capellus.*[23]

"A hood from Greece" is an enigmatic phrase peculiar to Russian *bylinas,* and the established theory is that it was a part of the mantle which monks and pilgrims wore to cover the head completely. The hood also symbolized Christianity, for Russians accepted the Orthodox faith from Greece.[24]

In the *bylinas,* sometimes a pilgrim wears a *shuba* (fur coat). But Sreznevsky assumes that formerly this word meant a kind of cloak that is also called a *capa.* Another mysterious phenomenon in the Russian folk epos is a pilgrim who carries a *kolokol* (bell) weighing a thousand pounds or more on his head. Sreznevsky tries to explain this expression as a corruption of, or confusion of *klakol,* the original form of kolokol, with cloak or clock.[25]

What was brought to Old Russia from the Mediterranean world savored of advanced civilization. To give an example, when Solovej Budimirovich, a wealthy merchant, visited the Kievan court,

> He presented the Princess with white damassin
> Cloth not so costly, but decorated skillfully
> With the craft of Constantinople
> With the wisdom of Jerusalem.[26]

The most elegant *bylina* hero Dobrynja Nikitich stayed for a long time on an errand in Constantinople. Learning that his sworn brother Aljosha Popovich, a dandy, is urging his wife to marry him in the absence of her hus-

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22 I. I. Sreznevsky, *op. cit.,* p. 199.

23 *Ibid.,* p. 200.

24 V. F. Miller, *Ekskursy v oblasti narodnogo eposa,* Moscow, 1892, p. 46, M. R. Vasmer, "Shapka zemli grecheskoj", in *Sbornik v chest' 70-letija G. N. Potanina,* SPb., 1910, pp. 45-64, and Y. Nakamura, "The Puzzle of a Greek Hood", in *Hitotsubashi Ronso,* vol. 76, No. 6, 1976, pp. 38-49.

25 I. I. Sreznevsky, *op. cit.,* pp. 203-204. In my opinion, the strange expression "to carry a bell on one's head" may have originated from the similarity in shape of a *kolokol* (bell) with a cloak.

26 Kirsha Danilov, *op. cit.,* p. 11.

band, Dobrynja returns hurriedly to Kiev and, disguised as a wandering minstrel, attends the wedding of the couple. He holds a *gusli* (psaltery) in his arms.

> He stretched the silken bowstring tightly,
> Stretched the golden *gusli* strings,
> Began to play upon the strings,
> Began to sing a song to the *gusli,*
> In a melody of Constantinople,
> But the words were of the life of Kiev, now and of old,
> Thus he enchanted all the people, young and old ...[27]

Another version runs as follows:

> And he began to play on the *gusli* of mulberry,
> Played adroitly tunes of Constantinople
> And tunes from Jerusalem, from the land of the
> Saracens ...[28]

Thus, the eastern Mediterranean world—including Constantinople, Jerusalem and, occasionally, the land of the Saracens—represented, in the minds of the Russian people, the civilization which provided spiritual nourishment for their country. Moreover, the sphere of these Russian pilgrimages was the only outer world that they regarded with respect and aspiration. It was strictly distinguished in the *bylina* from Tartaria and Lithuania, two formidable neighbors of medieval Russia.[29]

27 P. N. Rybnikov, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, p. 169.
28 *Ibid.,* p. 64.
29 For more detailed discussion of this problem, see Y. Nakamura, "The Mediterranean World in Russian Folk Epos", *Hitotsubashi Ronso,* vol. 72, No. 6, 1974, pp. 119-125.