

Re-writing the history of the Varangians

Medieval identities have been the subject of much scrutiny as a precursor to modern, national identities. Medieval peoples are usually seen as the ancestors, however imperfectly, of modern peoples and the search for their views on themselves have been a part of the debate of the origin of moderns. But what about medieval peoples that did not leave behind any well-defined modern entities? The Varangians are such a group. For a period of three or four centuries the Varangians existed and then they were gone, seemingly without a trace. They became a part of the memory of people in various European countries and cultures, a memory that progressively was shaped by the rules and requirements of its own metanarrative. The Varangians did not leave behind any modern institutions and very little material remains can be traced back to them. Their survival was due to their place in a narrative, which can be called the Varangian legend. The Vikings who ventured East have usually been called Varangians, to differentiate them from their compatriots in the West. This term, however, appears relatively late, and the first Vikings in the East were known as the Rus, a term from which the country name Russia and the ethnonym Russians later evolved. The grand narratives about the Varangians had different versions within different cultures. One of them is the Russian/Ukrainian concerning the foundation of the earliest Rus state. Another one, which will be the main focus of this paper, the early medieval evolution of a group of people known as the Rus, its eleventh-century transmutation into the Varangians and the development of the Old Norse tradition of the Varangian warriors in the service of the Roman emperor.

In later years, however, there is a certain shift in research on the Varangians with more focus on how to interpret the agenda of the sources available to us. These sources have their own peculiarities and a cultural setting particular to them. If the historiography of the Eastern

Vikings was for a long time characterized by emphasis on establishing the murky facts of Rus and Varangian activity in the East, the level of interest has begun to move towards different subjects of research, such as the interaction of different cultures, the formation of identities, and the development of a particular grand narrative concerning the Rus and the Varangians. The intention here is to highlight the ongoing “debate” (to use a term made popular in this context by Jan and Aleida Assmann) on the Rus and the Varangians in the medieval period. The aim is to compare and contrast sources emanating from different cultures, and analyse them with regard to the cultural and political context in which they were written and the purpose behind the narrative. An important part of this debate on the Rus and the Varangians was the fashioning of identities and how different cultures define themselves in comparison and contrast with the other.