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ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN VOLHYNIA (4th–11th Centuries)

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Abstract. *The article presents a comprehensive study of archaeological monuments reflecting the spread of early Christianity in Volhynia during the 4th–11th centuries. The study addresses the need to reconstruct the regional characteristics of Christianization in the context of active transformation of East Slavic identity, as well as the need for reliable methodological criteria for attributing transitional-period monuments. Three main categories of sources are analysed: remains of cult buildings, burial complexes, and artefacts decorated with Christian symbols. Particular attention is devoted to problems of interpretation and attribution of archaeological materials, as well as to the coexistence of pagan and Christian elements. The methodological framework combines archaeological, comparative-historical, and cultural-anthropological approaches. Three chronological stages of the penetration of Christian elements are identified: 4th–6th c. (sporadic influences), 7th–9th c. (formation of preconditions), and 10th–11th c. (institutionalization). The key role of Volhynia as a crossroads of Byzantine, Central European, and Kyivan Rus' influences is established. It is emphasized that the Christianization process was prolonged and uneven, and that religious syncretism persisted long after the official baptism of Rus'.*

Keywords: *archaeology, early Christianity, Volhynia, Christianization, burial complexes, sacred archaeology, Middle Ages, syncretism.*

1. Introduction.

The study of early Christian heritage through material culture remains one of the most pressing areas of contemporary medieval studies. At a time when questions about the origins of Ukrainian cultural space are attracting growing public and scholarly attention, the regional dimension of this process—particularly that of Volhynia—appears to be of particular significance. Volhynia, situated at the crossroads of trade and cultural routes between Byzantium, Central Europe, and the East Slavic lands, played a special role in the spread of a new religious worldview. At the same time, the regional dimensions of this process remain understudied [1, pp. 17–20].

Archaeological sites are an indispensable source for studying the spiritual transformations of the early Middle Ages, as they allow us to trace changes in the consciousness and way of life of broad segments of the population, rather than being confined to the elite perspective of written sources. The material remains of religious structures, burial complexes, objects bearing Christian symbols, and elements of the



sacred landscape serve as important indicators of religious processes spanning the 4th–11th centuries—a period ranging from the first fragmentary contacts with the late antique world to the institutionalization of the church during the era of Kyivan Rus’ [2, pp. 60–65].

Despite the significant body of accumulated material, a comprehensive synthesis of archaeological evidence regarding early Christianity in Volhynia remains a pressing task. Studies have often been fragmentary or chronologically limited in scope, and questions of the confessional attribution of monuments have frequently been considered outside an interdisciplinary context [3, pp. 5–7]. These gaps call for a systematic study covering the full chronological range and proposing a current interpretive framework.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of early Christian archaeological sites in Volhynia during the 4th–11th centuries and to assess their significance for understanding regional Christianization. Research objectives: to systematize the source base; to identify typological groups of sites; to clarify the chronological stages of the process; to analyze issues of interpretation; to outline the role of Volhynia in the broader context of the Christianization of Kyivan Rus’.

2. Overview of Related Research.

The study of early Christianity in Volhynia lies at the intersection of several academic disciplines: archaeology, religious studies, medieval studies, and cultural anthropology. Scholarly engagement with this topic developed gradually in Ukraine, reflecting broader trends in the humanities.

The first descriptive observations regarding early Christian elements in Volhynia appear in the works of researchers from the late 19th to early 20th centuries. During the Soviet era, the religious attribution of monuments was largely sidelined by ideological constraints. Researchers at the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine made a significant contribution to the study of the region’s material culture; their works present a substantial body of materials from Kyivan Rus’ settlements and burial grounds [4, pp. 48–65].

In the post-Soviet era, interest in the regional aspects of Christianization has



grown significantly. M. M. Kuchynko's comprehensive works on the archaeology of Volhynia and the Volhynian region laid the foundation for the systematic study of sites from prehistoric times to the late Middle Ages, notably including a section dedicated to paganism and early Christianity [1, pp. 17–89]. Concurrently, S. V. Tersky, in his monographs on the Kyivan Rus' cities of the region—Lutsk, Volodymyr, and Peresopnytsia—systematized archaeological materials related to the emergence of sacred infrastructure [5, pp. 80–120; 9, pp. 45–180].

Research on burial rites as an indicator of religious change was conducted in a series of key works by O. P. Motsi, who, using extensive comparative material, traced the transformation of necropolises from pagan to early Christian forms [2, pp. 65–72]. The theological and ecclesiastical-institutional aspects of the process, based on materials from Kyivan Rus', have been explored in the studies of V. M. Rychko, which examine the role of the church in the sociocultural formation of the state [6, pp. 7–120].

At the same time, a number of controversial issues remain in the scholarly literature. A key issue remains the problem of criteria for identifying monuments as early Christian, as well as the interpretation of syncretic objects where pagan and Christian elements are combined in a single archaeological context [7, pp. 34–67]. A significant portion of field data from regional excavations remains inaccessible or unpublished, hindering the formulation of broader conclusions.

3. Sources and Methods.

The methodological foundation of this study is a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that combines the tools of archaeology, religious studies, cultural anthropology, and comparative medieval studies. This choice is dictated by the nature of the subject matter: monuments of early Christianity reflect not only the material aspects of religious practice but also deeper transformations in worldview and the social organization of society.

The key method is the archaeological approach, which involves the analysis of the remains of religious structures, burial complexes, and objects bearing Christian symbolism. Within this framework, a typological method is employed to classify the monuments based on functional and morphological characteristics, as well as to trace



the evolution of their forms chronologically from the 4th to the 11th centuries.

To compare materials from different sites and regions, a comparative method was applied, which allows for the identification of both general features characteristic of the Christianization of Kyivan Rus' as a whole and the local specificity of Volhynia—a region at the intersection of several cultural areas [8, pp. 340–380]. The chronological analysis is based on a combination of stratigraphic observations, the typology of accompanying artifacts, and analogies from other regions.

An interpretive approach was also employed to identify the symbolic meaning of material objects—cross imagery, Christograms, and the spatial arrangement of burials. A critical reassessment of earlier attributions, informed by current archaeological scholarship, allows for more nuanced and balanced conclusions [9, pp. 15–40].

4. Research Findings.

4.1. Typology of Archaeological Sites.

Archaeological materials associated with early Christianity in Volhynia are characterized by considerable diversity and reflect the complex, phased nature of the Christianization process. They emerged in a setting where pagan and Christian beliefs long coexisted. Analysis of these artifacts allows us not only to trace the penetration of new ideas but also to outline the social and cultural transformations associated with the establishment of a new tradition [10, pp. 120–150].

Conventionally, the artifacts can be divided into three main groups: religious structures, burial complexes, and material culture objects bearing Christian symbols. This typology allows for a comprehensive assessment of the scale and nature of the spread of new religious practices in the region [11, pp. 17–56].

Religious Structures.

The most indicative, yet at the same time the least numerous, are the archaeological remains of religious structures associated with early forms of worship. These primarily include the foundations of stone or wooden buildings oriented according to the canons of Christian tradition, as well as the remains of sacred complexes within Kyivan Rus' fortified settlements.

Individual finds in Volhynia indicate the existence of religious sites even before



the official introduction of Christianity. Their interpretation remains a matter of debate due to the absence of direct evidence of the structures' unambiguously Christian nature. At the same time, the orientation of the buildings, their layout features, and the nature of the accompanying material suggest their use in a ritual context [12, pp. 90–120].

Burial Complexes.

The most representative group of sources consists of burial sites. The transformation of burial rites is considered one of the most reliable indicators of the spread of new religious ideas among various segments of the population [2, pp. 60–68]. Inhumation burials from the 4th–11th centuries are typically characterized by westward or eastward orientation of the deceased, an absence or reduction of grave goods, and the gradual displacement of cremation rites.

In a number of cases, clusters of burials around sacred centers have been documented, which may indicate the formation of the first Christian cemeteries. At the same time, it should be noted that such features do not always constitute unequivocal evidence of religious affiliation. Some researchers point to the possibility of traditional beliefs persisting within the framework of a new religious paradigm—so-called everyday syncretism [7, pp. 55–70].

Objects with Christian Symbolism.

A separate category consists of material cultural objects bearing Christian symbolism: pectoral crosses, enkolpions, fragments of jewelry depicting a cross, and cross-shaped pendants. Such artifacts are found both in burial complexes and in the cultural layers of settlements, indicating the prevalence of Christian symbols in everyday life [13, pp. 90–130].

At the same time, individual finds may have entered the region through trade contacts or reflected an elite milieu unrelated to personal faith, which complicates their unambiguous attribution. Therefore, the analysis of such objects requires a contextual approach that takes into account the nature of the site, the social status of the interred individual, and the broader cultural context of the find [1, pp. 56–89].

4.2. Chronology and Stages of Spread.

The spread of Christianity in Volhynia was a gradual and uneven process that



cannot be reduced to a single event—the official baptism of Rus’ at the end of the 10th century.

First stage (4th–6th centuries): isolated influences. The earliest manifestations of Christian elements in Volhynia date to the 4th–6th centuries and are fragmentary in nature. Isolated finds of objects bearing relevant symbols and individual burials with features atypical of pagan rites indicate contacts between the local population and the late-antique cultural sphere [10, pp. 130–155]. Their interpretation, however, remains a matter of debate: the symbolism could have been apotropaic or syncretic in nature, without reflecting a conscious Christian identity.

Second stage (7th–9th centuries): formation of preconditions. During this period, a noticeable transformation of burial rites is observed: an increase in the number of inhumations, a change in the orientation of bodies, and a reduction in grave goods. A characteristic feature is the coexistence of various religious practices—elements of pagan rites and new symbolic forms [14, pp. 34–65]. This may indicate a gradual adaptation of Christian concepts to the local cultural environment, particularly among the tribal and early urban elite.

Third stage (10th–11th centuries): institutionalization. The most representative material dates to the 10th–11th centuries: the emergence of permanent religious structures, organized Christian cemeteries, and the widespread use of objects with distinct symbolism. Monuments from this period attest to the consolidation of Christian norms in funerary practices and the spatial organization of settlements [3, pp. 40–100]. At the same time, even during this period, the materials demonstrate the preservation of certain elements of traditional culture, confirming the protracted and heterogeneous nature of the process.

4.3. Interpretation Challenges.

One of the key challenges of this study is the difficulty of accurately interpreting the artifacts. The materials often lack direct evidence that would unambiguously indicate the religious affiliation of the object.

The central difficulty lies in the coexistence of multiple religious traditions throughout the early Middle Ages. The prolonged parallel existence of pagan beliefs



and new Christian concepts led to the emergence of syncretic forms, in which individual symbols were combined with traditional ritual practices. One of the most debated issues is the interpretation of burials: the orientation of bodies, the absence of grave goods, or the presence of symbolic objects is not always sufficient grounds for an unambiguous conclusion [2, pp. 68–74].

In the early Middle Ages, the cross could serve not only a confessional but also an apotropaic function. Therefore, the presence of cross-shaped objects in the cultural layer does not always indicate the full integration of Christian beliefs into the population's worldview [9, pp. 45–60]. Contemporary approaches emphasize the need to consider such artifacts within a broad cultural context that takes into account social, economic, and spatial factors [8, pp. 380–420].

4.4. Centers of Diffusion.

An important element of the research is the study of Kyivan Rus' cities and sacred centers, within which the first centers of Christian culture took shape. The most extensively studied is ancient Volodymyr—one of the key administrative centers of the Volhynian region, where the remains of religious structures, Christian cemeteries, and numerous objects bearing Christian symbols have been discovered [12, pp. 45–180]. The evidence indicates that a Christian community was active there as early as the 10th century [15, pp. 120–160].

An important sacred center in the region is the complex in the village of Zymne, where the Svyatohorsk Dormition Monastery occupies an ancient place of worship. Excavation results confirm the existence of early medieval religious structures here, indicating the formation of a sacred space even before the official baptism of Rus' [1, pp. 32–44].

Lutsk (ancient Luchesk) also served as one of the centers for the formation of the region's Christian sacred topography: remains of early churches and religious artifacts have been discovered [5, pp. 80–120]. No less significant is Peresopnytsia—an important cultural and religious center whose long-standing Christian traditions culminated in the creation of the famous Peresopnytsia Gospel in the 16th century [3, pp. 70–90].



4.5. Christian Symbolism in the Finds.

The most common finds are pectoral crosses of various shapes and materials—bronze, silver, and lead. They functioned both as expressions of personal faith and as protective amulets [13, pp. 90–110]. Enkolpions—reliquary crosses for storing holy relics—are typically associated with the social or spiritual elite and attest to a conscious religious identity [11, pp. 56–89].

Pendants and ornaments with cross-shaped motifs may have had a dual—religious and decorative—meaning, which complicates their unambiguous attribution. The discovery of icons and other objects of personal piety in burials indicates the spread of individual religious practice and the formation of new models of spiritual culture [16, pp. 50–60].

5. Discussion and Analysis of Results.

Archaeological sites are of fundamental importance for studying the spread of Christianity. Unlike written sources, which primarily reflect the perspective of the political or ecclesiastical elite, material evidence allows us to trace transformations in the daily life of the population and its religious beliefs [4, pp. 125–160].

Burial complexes are the most reliable indicator of shifts in worldview. The gradual abandonment of cremation, changes in the orientation of bodies, and a reduction in burial goods indicate the profound influence of new ideas on society [2, pp. 70–75]. Religious structures and their topography reflect the institutionalization of the new religion and the formation of a sacred spatial organization. Finally, objects of personal piety attest to the individual dimension of Christianization—the level that is most difficult to reconstruct from written sources [9, pp. 60–90].

Thus, the synthesis of all categories of material evidence enables us to reconstruct the Christianization of Volhynia as a multidimensional process that encompassed the religious, social, and cultural spheres of medieval society. In this context, Volhynia emerges not as a passive recipient of external influences, but as an active participant in the pan-European cultural transformation of the early Middle Ages.

The present study confirms and refines several positions established in previous scholarship. The three-stage periodization proposed here aligns broadly with the



frameworks developed by Kuchynko [1] and Terskyi [3], yet the Volhynian material suggests that the threshold between the preparatory and institutionalization stages was more fluid than earlier syntheses acknowledged. The concentration of early Christian finds in proto-urban centers—Volodymyr, Luchesk, and Peresopnytsia—supports the hypothesis that Christianization in the region was driven primarily by elite networks and trade contacts rather than by systematic ecclesiastical missionary activity. This pattern distinguishes Volhynia from the more centrally administered Christianization of the Kyivan heartland documented by Motsia and Rychko [7; 9], and calls for a reassessment of the region's role as an independent node of religious transmission between Byzantium, Great Moravia, and the East Slavic world. The persistence of syncretic material culture well into the 11th century, documented across all site types, further indicates that the official baptism of Rus' in 988 represented a political and ecclesiastical turning point rather than an immediate transformation of popular religious practice—a conclusion with broader implications for our understanding of medieval Christianization processes in Eastern Europe.

6. Conclusions.

This study allows us to draw a number of general conclusions regarding the nature and characteristics of the Christianization process in Volhynia based on archaeological evidence.

First, the study of material remains convincingly demonstrates that the penetration of Christian elements into the cultural space of Volhynia occurred long before the official baptism of Rus' in 988. The earliest fragmentary evidence dates to the 4th–6th centuries and is associated with trade and cultural contacts with the late antique world and the zone of Byzantine influence. This supports the view that Christianization was an organic, gradual process rather than an abrupt event.

Second, analysis of the artifacts allows us to identify three chronologically sequential stages: isolated influences (4th–6th centuries), the formation of preconditions (7th–9th centuries), and institutionalization (10th–11th centuries). Each of these stages is characterized by a specific set of archaeological markers reflecting the deepening integration of the new religious paradigm into social and cultural life.



Third, it has been established that even after the official establishment of Christianity, elements of traditional beliefs persisted in the material culture of Volhynia. The syncretism of religious concepts, documented in the archaeological record, is a characteristic feature of the transitional period and requires a cautious interpretive strategy.

Fourth, the study demonstrates the key role of Volhynia as a region at the crossroads of several cultural spheres. Interaction with Byzantine, Central European (particularly Great Moravian and Polish), and Kyivan Rus' influences gave the regional process of Christianization a special dynamic and opened Volhynia to early forms of Christian culture. This aspect still requires in-depth comparative study.

Fifth, it is emphasized that the interpretation of early Christian monuments requires an interdisciplinary approach. Unambiguous confessional attribution based on isolated details (orientation of burials, presence of a cross) is methodologically unreliable without taking into account the full context: stratigraphy, accompanying material, spatial organization of the site, and the social profile of the population.

Future research should expand the source base by incorporating materials from recent excavations, applying scientific dating methods (radiocarbon analysis, geochemical studies), and undertaking a systematic comparative analysis of Volhynian sites with those in neighboring regions of Poland, Belarus, and the central Rus' lands of present-day Ukraine.

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