

## The Liberation of Kiev *sub anno* 968

Inés García de la Puente

*Spain*

The *Povest' vremennykh let* or *Tale of Bygone Years*, also known as the *Nestor Chronicle* or *Primary Chronicle* (henceforth *PVL*), is probably the most important work written in Kievan Rus'. It was compiled in Old Russian at the beginning of the 12th century, which is a relatively late date in Indo-European terms. However, as we have shown elsewhere (García de la Puente 2006), some of the materials inserted in the *PVL* have proved very fruitful for Indo-European comparative analysis. As a sample of what can be done with other parts of the *PVL*, in the following pages we will present an analysis of one of the passages of the Old Russian Chronicle in the light of another Indo-European narrative.

In the passage of the *PVL* corresponding to the year 968, it is recounted that, taking advantage of the absence from the city of Prince Svjatoslav, the Pechenegs lay siege to Kiev. The city is liberated by a young man who, disguising himself as a Pecheneg, passes through enemy territory and crosses to the far side of the River Dnieper. There he finds Pretich, the military leader, whom he convinces of the need for immediate action. Pretich and his Russian troops advance on the city the following day. The enemy lines fall, with the Pechenegs fleeing in the belief that it is in fact Svjatoslav who has arrived, and a peace accord is settled between Pretich and the chief of the Pechenegs.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that this passage contains more than fiction than fact is betrayed by a number of details. The way in which, according to the *PVL*, the liberation of Kiev is achieved is particularly interesting for the present analysis, since it is broadly similar to the liberation of another city whose story is told in another IE tradition: the siege of Rome by the Etruscans under Porsena, and its liberation by means of the

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<sup>1</sup>The passage appears in Ostrowski-Birnbaum-Lunt (2003: 432-453, columns 65,19-67,19).

individual acts of two men (cf. Livy 2.10-13, Dionysius of Halicarnassus 5.22-34). The following table offers an overview of the events in the *PVL* set against those described by Livy. (The text of Dionysius of Halicarnassus is equally useful, but is omitted from the table for practical reasons; it is, however, referred to in the subsequent analysis):

PVL sub anno 968	Livy 2. 10	Livy 2. 12-13
<p>The Pechenegs <b>attack</b> Rus' for the first time</p> <p>The Pechenegs <u>lay siege to</u> Kíev, where the people of the city along with Ol'ga and her grandchildren are.</p> <p>Kíev is utterly cut off; behind the Pechenegs lies the Dnieper, on the other side of which wait Russian troops under Pretich; he remains inactive, not knowing the exact status of the siege.</p> <p>As a result of the siege there is <u>famine</u> in the city. The population pleads for someone to try to cross the enemy camp and the river to reach Pretich and inform him of the critical situation.</p>	<p>Porsena <b>attacks</b> Rome.</p> <p>The Etruscans take control of the Janiculum and advance to the Suplicius bridge, the only weak point in the defences of the city, which is also well protected by the Tiber and the city walls.</p> <p>Horatius Cocles is in charge of defending the bridge while the Romans destroy it. He intimidates the Etruscans with his fierce look and confounds them with his words.</p> <p>The bridge is finally demolished; the <b>noise</b> of the bridge collapsing and of the <b>clamour</b> of the jubilant Romans <b>strikes terror</b> into the hearts of the Etruscans, who are momentarily paralyzed.</p>	<p>Porsena <u>lays siege to</u> Rome.</p> <p>The enclosing and looting of the fields result in a <u>lack</u> of wheat.</p>

A youth volunteers to undertake the perilous venture and the population accept his offer. The youth mingles with the Pechenegs. He **leaps** into the river. The enemy **archers**, realising who he is, fire at him, but **he is too far away** and **succeeds in crossing** the river and reaching the troops of Pretich, who pick him up in a boat.

He is taken before Pretich and advises him that the city will fall without his intervention. Pretich decides to act.

The following morning Pretich and his men advance in their boats with trumpets **fiercely blaring**. The people of the city **shout** at the same time.

The Pechenegs flee in fear of their lives. Ol'ga and her grandchildren reach the other side of the river in the boats.

On realising what is happening, the Pecheneg chief turns back to interrogate Pretich; the latter

Cocles **leaps** into the river; the Etruscans **fire innumerable arrows against him**, but **none hits home**, and he **reaches safety** by swimming to the bank of the river.

A youth, C. Mucius Scaevola, conceives a plan to enter the enemy camp; the Senate approves.

Scaevola mingles with the Etruscans and reaches Porsena and a secretary with a concealed knife.

He mistakenly murders the secretary.

Scaevola is detained and interrogated by Porsena, enraged and terrified at the same time: Scaevola

<p><u>lies</u>, saying he is <u>merely the vanguard</u> of a <u>multitude</u> of the prince's men who are arriving fast on his heels.</p>	<p><u>lies</u>, saying he is simply <u>the first</u> of a <u>huge contingent</u> of young Romans mobilised against him. To give his words credence he plunges his hand into the fire where it is burnt.</p>
<p><u>Believing the lie</u>, the Pecheneg <u>prince</u> offers a <u>peace bargain immediately</u></p>	<p><u>Believing the lie</u> and full of admiration for the bravery of the youth, Porsena releases him. Impressed both by the words and action of Scaevola, <u>Porsena immediately puts forward plans for peace with Rome</u>, which are accepted.</p>
<p><u>The Pechenegs retreat.</u></p>	<p><u>The Etruscans retreat.</u></p>

It may be confusing that what appears as a single episode in the *PVL* is divided into two chapters in Livy. However, this is not a major obstacle for our comparison, since the two episodes in Livy form part of the same specific conflict, they are narrated almost consecutively and they lead to the same climax, viz. a peace treaty between Romans and Etruscans. In other words, the separation is merely formal and both chapters form a thematic unity. The parallels are as follows:

- a) The Pechenegs attack Rus' while the Etruscans attack Rome (Livy 2.10); both sets of attackers then lay siege to the main cities (Kiev and Rome) after a failed attempt to conquer them.
- b) Famine results from the siege: in Kiev "the people were debilitated by (lack of) food and water" (*PVL*, column 65); likewise in Rome *...et frumenti cum summa caritate inopia...*<sup>2</sup> (Livy 2.12.1);

<sup>2</sup>"(...) the corn was giving out, and what there was cost a very high price (...)"

- c) In the *PVL* a young person, in the face of the request of the people, volunteers to cross the enemy camp and the river in order to make the Russian troops, camped on the far bank of the Dnieper, aware of the desperate situation. In Livy (2.12.2-6) a young person, Mucius Scaevola, conceives an idea to attain the freedom of Rome, which is accepted by the Senate. We must note that when the Old Russian text refers to "people", it most probably indicates the advice of elders, who at the time described in the *PVL* constituted an important part of local government in Eastern Slavic communities. As such, the parallel between the Senate in the Latin story and the elders in the Eastern Slav one is clear: both fulfil the role of ratifying the proposal of the young person, with the difference that in the *PVL* it is they who request volunteers and in *Ab urbe condita* the initiative comes from Scaevola himself. Both protagonists are young, and they are distinguished by their courage and audacity (as also is Cocles in Livy 2.10.11-12). In both cases, it is famine which acts as the incentive for their decisive behaviour: each knows that, if he does not act, his city will be lost owing to starvation.
- d) The young Kievan merges with the Pechenegs sufficiently to be taken for one of them until he gains the river bank; Scaevola passes himself off as an Etruscan until he is before Porsena. In the *PVL* it is told how the youth crosses the Pecheneg camp: "He came out of the city holding some reins and mingled with them, asking 'Has anyone seen a horse?', for he knew how to speak Pecheneg and they took him for one of their own" (*PVL* column 66). Dionysius of Halicarnassus (5.28.1) details the behaviour of Scaevola whilst in the enemy camp παρακρουσάμενος τοὺς φυλάττοντας τὰς πύλας ὡς τῶν ὁμοειδῶν τις, ὄπλον τε οὐθέν φανερόν ἔχων καὶ γλώττην Τυρρηνικῆ διαλεγόμενος, ἣν ἐξέμαθεν ἔτι παῖς ὢν ὑπὸ τροφῆς Τυρρηνίδος τὸ γένος ἐκδιδαχθείς<sup>3</sup>. Clearly, mastery of the enemy's language serves both the youth from Kiev and Scaevola well in their exploits.

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(Foster 1961: 254-255).

<sup>3</sup>"(...) having deceived the guard at the gates, who took him for one of their own countrymen since he carried no weapon openly and spoke the Tyrrhenian language, which he had been taught when a child (...)" (Spelman 1961: 82-85).

- e) When the protagonist of the *PVL* reaches the bank of the River Dnieper, he dives in naked and swims to the other side; in Livy, Cocles jumps into the river when the bridge falls, with the difference that he does so totally armed: *Ita sic armatus in Tiberium desiluit...* (Livy 2.10.11)
- f) The Pechenegs shoot at the Kievan youngster with arrows: “they bombarded him with arrows but could do him no harm” (*PVL* column 66); the Etruscans shoot at Cocles: *...multisque superincidentibus telis incolumis ad suos tranavit...*<sup>4</sup> (Livy 2.10.11). This storm of arrows is clearly the most outstanding common feature of the two accounts.
- g) Both protagonists emerge unscathed from the hail of arrows: Cocles reaches the city and the youngster from Kiev, once seen by Pretich, is taken on board ship. Probably the small difference in the methods of reaching the far shore of the river relates to the difference between the two rivers themselves: the Dnieper is evidently a much wider river than the Tiber, and the assistance received from the waiting fleet seems appropriate.
- h) When Pretich sets sail for Kiev with his small fleet the following morning, his soldiers noisily sound their trumpets and the people under siege shout loudly. With such a clamour the enemies take fright and flee: “[Pretich and his soldiers] boarded their ships and began to make a great noise with their trumpets, and the people of the city began to shout. The Pechenegs, believing the prince had arrived, fled the city in disarray...” (*PVL* column 66). In *Ab Urbe Condita* a great noise produces the same results for the enemy: *...iam impetu conabantur detrudere virum, cum simul fragor rupti pontis, simul clamor Romanorum alacritate perfecti operis sublatus, pavore subito impetum sustinuit*<sup>5</sup> (Livy 2.10.10). The sequence of events in the two accounts is different. In Livy the uproar follows on immediately from Cocles’s escape, whilst in the *PVL* it happens the day after the youth crosses the river. The fear felt by the enemy which follows the shouting in Livy gives rise to a brief pause in which the hero makes good his escape; in the *PVL* the clamor does not help the hero’s escape but rather the military leader’s arrival in the city, made easier by the flight of the Pechenegs.

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<sup>4</sup>“(...) and under a shower of missiles swam across unhurt (...)” (Foster 1961: 250-251).

<sup>5</sup>“(...) they were trying to dislodge him by a charge, when the crash of the falling bridge and the cheer which burst from the throats of the Romans, exulting in the completion of their task, checked them in mid-career with a sudden dismay (...)” (Foster 1961: 250-251).

Despite the slight difference in the timing of these events, the element of noise is decisive in turning the course of the story in favor of the besieged city. Moreover, in both traditions there is a double source of noise: the sound made by people shouting, which happens both in the Old Russian and in the Latin accounts, and the noise produced by external elements—in the *PVL* by the trumpets, in Livy by the bridge collapsing.

- i) When the Pecheneg chief realises that it is not in fact Svjatoslav who has arrived, he retraces his steps to speak to Pretich. In a kind of interrogation, the enemy leader demands to know who he is speaking to. Pretich's answer is a lie: "I am one of his [Svjatoslav's] men and I have come with the vanguard, but behind me comes the prince with his army, a countless multitude." The compiler of the *PVL* here clarifies the matter: "(...) but he said this to frighten them." (*PVL* columns 66-67). In reality, Pretich's intervention is a consequence of the extremity of the situation and his moral obligation to the prince. In Livy, Scaevola is taken prisoner and interrogated by Porsena, and his answers are lies: he makes Porsena believe that a group of young Romans have banded together to assassinate him in the way that Scaevola has tried. First he says: *...longus post me ordo est idem petentium decus...*<sup>6</sup> (Livy 2.12.10) and later: *...trecenti coniuravimus principes iuventutis Romanae, ut in te hac via grassaremur*<sup>7</sup> (Livy 2.12.15). The lie in the Latin account is more highly developed than in the *PVL*, but both lies have the same motives: to hide one's own inferiority and intimidate the enemy. They also have the same outcome—preventing the capitulation of the city in question. Had the Pechenegs or the Etruscans known that their enemy was defenceless, they would have attacked and defeated him without difficulties.
- j) The mutilation of Scaevola's hand has no direct parallel in the Slav account. However, this feature of the Roman story is very important when relating the Roman tradition with the Scandinavian, as we will see below.
- k) The reactions of the Pecheneg chief and Porsena are the same: both offer to sign a peace agreement. Had it not been for the lies of Scaevola and Pretich, both sieges would have been prolonged with fatal results for Rome

<sup>6</sup>"(...) behind me is a long line of men who are seeking the same honour." (Foster 1961: 258-259).

<sup>7</sup>" (...)we are three hundred, the foremost youths of Rome, who have conspired to assail you in this fashion." (Foster 1961: 260-261).

and Kiev. Ingenuously believing the words they hear, they sue for peace when possibly they could have pressed on to victory.

- 1) In neither case is the peace very secure. In Rome it is only ratified after the events recounted in the passage that deals with Claelia<sup>8</sup> (cf. infra), and in Kiev, despite the episode seeming to end with the words “And the Pechenegs retreated from the city” (*PVL* column 67), it is stated that they continued to prevent the watering of horses in the Lýbed’. (Interestingly, Livy also mentions that the troops of Porsena do not allow grazing on the banks of the Tiber.) Only on the return of Svjatoslav are the Pechenegs expelled, temporarily at least, to the steppes.

Although the passage dealing with Claelia is of more tangential interest because of its circumspection, it is still worthy of mention. It is narrated by Livy and by Dionysius of Halicarnassus after the passage regarding Scaevola, although the latter author does not name the heroine, who was a hostage in the Etruscan camp. She succeeds in escaping with the other young serving girls,<sup>9</sup> encouraging them to swim across the Tiber in order to reach the bank occupied by Roman troops. This escape is also effected under a hail of arrows: *dux agminis virginum inter tela hostium Tiberim tranavit*<sup>10</sup> (Livy 2.13.6). Thus we see another character from Livy who performs an analogous action to those of the heroes of Rome and Kiev.

Later in *Ab Urbe Condita*, there is the description of two actions which similarly reproduce the theme of a dangerous crossing of enemy territory: in Livy (5.46) Fabius Dorsus is described resisting the Gauls who lay siege to Rome by crossing enemy positions to reach the Quirinal and make an offering to the gods. In the same episode is described the adventure of Pontius Cominus, another youth who, coming from Veii, infiltrates Rome by fooling the enemy guard in order to bring

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<sup>8</sup>The Claelia passage is analysed by Dumézil (1973: 266-267; 286-289) and constitutes an episode which is closely linked to those of Cocles and Scaevola.

<sup>9</sup>According to Dumézil (1973: 287) there is no conclusive evidence to believe that all the young serving girls fled with her, since neither Dionysius of Halicarnassus (5. 34) nor Plutarch (*Publicola* 8. 8) make specific reference to the fact.

<sup>10</sup>“(…) heading a band of girls swam the river and, under a rain of hostile darts (…)” (Foster 1961: 262-263).



before the senate the proposal decided from Veii to recall Camillus from exile and name him dictator.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that the similarities to the *PVL* are less well defined.

It is also clear that we are dealing with a single recurring idea: *the crossing*, which in both traditions has two forms. Cocles (like Claelia) crosses the Tiber, then Scaevola crosses the enemy camp; the young Kievan crosses the enemy camp and then the Dnieper. In all cases the river crossing is made under a rain of arrows. What is more, the rivers in question were hugely significant for the respective cultures and their capital cities.

The anonymous young Kievan plays a much more prominent role than Pretich in the narration of the *PVL*, whereas Cocles and Scaevola feature more or less equally in Livy. All the actions realised by Cocles and part of those performed by Scaevola in Livy are enacted by the young Kievan in the *PVL*, while Pretich only parallels the last part of Scaevola's actions (those that take place after he has been detained by the Etruscans). However, this divergence is not surprising since, as Allen (2000: 58) remarks: "If life were easy for comparativists, a single character or event in one tradition would have a single counterpart in each of the others, but in reality characters may fuse or split over time."

It is also interesting that both the *PVL* and Dionysius of Halicarnassus draw attention to the same detail: the mastery of the enemy's language which allows the protagonist to gain access to the enemy camp and be mistaken for one of their own.

Another constant in the accounts of Kiev and Rome is the use of lies in favor of the besieged population, from whose point of view, it must be said, the stories are told. The behavior of the protagonists is that of the *trickster*, and it would be useful here to make passing reference to the similarities between Scaevola and a figure from Scandinavian mythology, Tyr. Dumézil (1968, I: 424-428; 1973: 271-276) showed the existence of links between Cocles and Odin on the one hand, and between Scaevola and Tyr on the other. The latter two sacrifice a hand to lend credence to a false vow, while in the former two cases it is sight that is stressed: Odin is blind in one eye, and Cocles scares the enemy with his fierce look and, besides, his name means etymologically "the one-eyed".

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<sup>11</sup>Thanks to Nick Allen for calling my attention to this passage.

Although the similarities between Cocles and Odin are not as close as those between Scaevola and Tyr, the general coincidence between the Scandinavian gods and the Roman heroes is surprising.

In the legend that has reached us through the *PVL* there is no evidence of any of the protagonists losing a body part, an essential element in the parallels between the Roman and Scandinavian characters. All that can be proposed is that originally, perhaps, there were amongst the Eastern Slavs one or two heroes who were mutilated during the course of the ventures, and that over the years this element, for unknown reasons, disappeared from the legend. We stress, this is a hypothesis as yet without corroborating evidence, and possibly no more than a flight of fancy.

### Conclusion

As we have shown, there are differences between Livy and the narrative of the *PVL*. But we have also shown that there are convergences, and that they are important both in substance and number. We believe, therefore, that the legend transmitted in the *PVL* and that told by Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus are two versions of the same original legend.

How is it possible that the *PVL* records a legend so similar in its various stages to one written by the classical authors of antiquity? It was most probably not the case that the authors of the *PVL* knew first-hand the classic texts: their ignorance in this area has been demonstrated by both Thomson (1999) and Franklin (2002). If the answer does not lie in a cultural borrowing, we are left with only two possibilities. Either

- (i) the Roman legends were handed down orally by the Eastern Slavs, who had heard them first-hand—certainly not out of the bounds of possibility, given the frequent contact between Roman merchants and the inhabitants of the territory surrounding the Dnieper in the centuries before the establishment of the Slav states (cf. Franklin-Shepard 1996); or
- (ii) both the Roman and Slav versions of the legends are the offspring of an earlier version.

The fact that it is not possible, as it is with the characters in Livy, to establish parallels between the protagonists of the *PVL* and (via Livy) their supposed analogues in Nordic Mythology could be considered an argument against an Indo-European origin of the *PVL*. However, both the development of the actions and the details of the Slav account are similar enough to those of the Roman version for us not to underestimate the antiquity and importance of the *PVL*: although we should not accept it uncontested, we should nonetheless remain open to the possibility of a common original source.

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