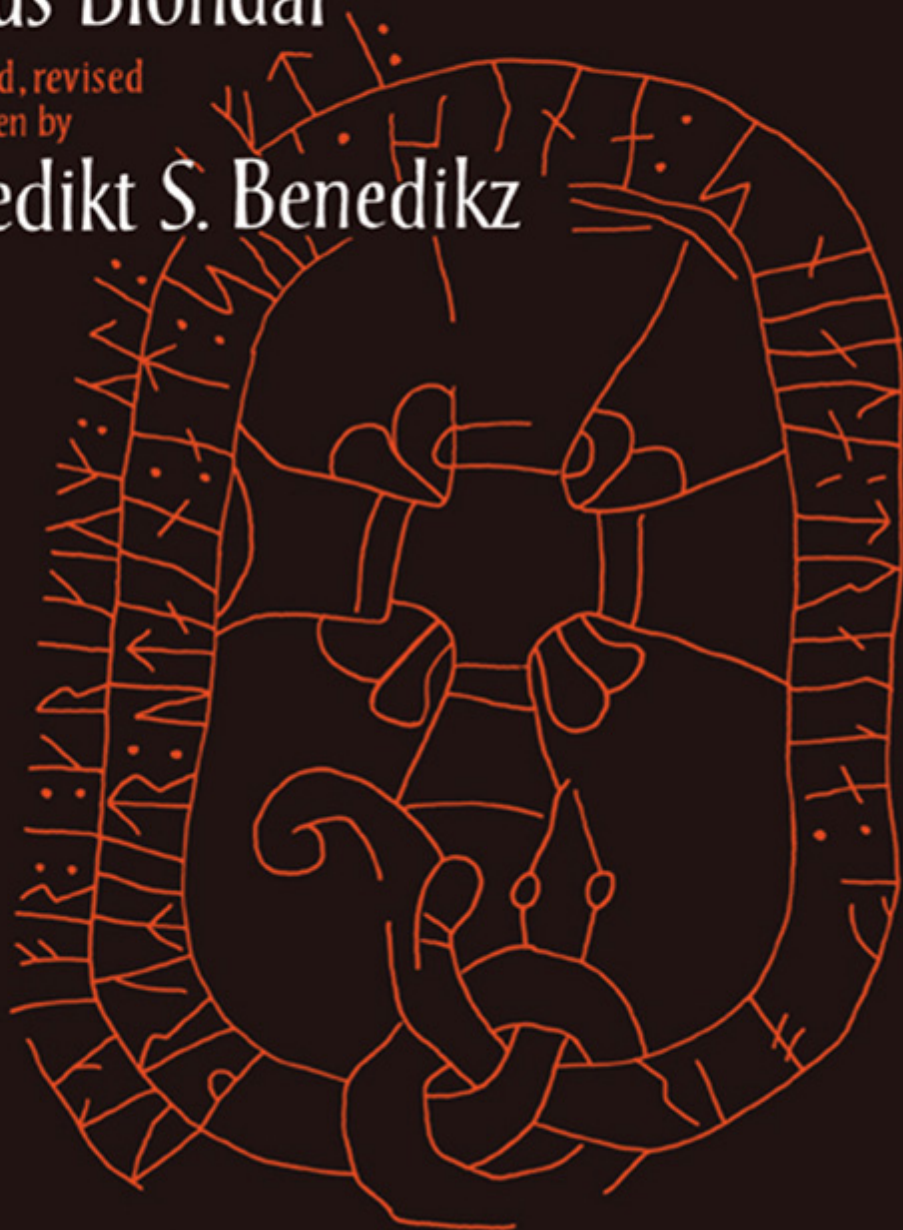


# THE VARANGIANS OF BYZANTIUM

Sigfús Blöndal

translated, revised  
& rewritten by

Benedikt S. Benedikz



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# THE VARANGIANS OF BYZANTIUM



BASIL II  
Emperor of the East, 976-1025  
Founder of the Varangian Regiment

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Sigfús Blöndal

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An aspect of Byzantine military history  
translated, revised and rewritten by  
Benedikt S. Benedikz

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(from a Psalter in St Mark's, Venice)

*Map 1* The Empire of Basil II, c. 1025 (*Cambridge Medieval History*,  
vol. iv, *The Byzantine Empire*, ed. J. M. Hussey) pp. 34–5

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# Preface

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On the title-page of this book stand two names. That of Sigfús Blöndal stands in the place of honour, and this is right, for the giant labour of gathering the widely scattered sources of information and attempting to make a coherent story out of them was his in the first instance. As he is not as well known to the English-speaking world as he should be, it is proper to give a brief summary of his life and career here.

Sigfús Benedikt Bjarnarson Blöndal was born on 2 October 1874 at Hjallaland in Vatnsdalur in Northern Iceland, the son of Björn Blöndal, the farmer there, a man of a well-connected family, and his wife Guðrún, also born of a family of parsons and officials. In 1883 Björn Blöndal moved to Reykjavík, and Sigfús entered the Latin School there in 1886. The family had to struggle for their existence against poverty and grievous loss, for Björn was drowned at sea in a gale in 1887, but friends came to their help, and found the means to see Sigfús through the Latin School course, which he accomplished with distinction, being dimitted at the top of the School in 1892. He sailed to Copenhagen the same autumn, and read for the degree of *candidatus magisterii* in Latin, Greek and English, taking his degree in 1898. After doing various jobs he was given a postgraduate grant to spend the year 1900–1 in England, and was appointed Assistant in the Royal Library, Copenhagen in 1901, where he was to spend his entire working life, being promoted to Assistant Librarian, and ending his days as Chief Cataloguer, having among his colleagues a reputation for vast erudition in numerous fields, and a super-pedantic temper in matters of cataloguing practice.<sup>1</sup> He also found time, after the death of Professor

<sup>1</sup> I. Koefod *et al.* (ed.), *Med Birkelund pa forperronen*, Copenhagen, 1972, esp. 44ff.

Valtýr Guðmundsson, to teach Modern Icelandic in Copenhagen University from 1931 to 1946.

The labours of a full-time member of staff in a great national library are not often such as to leave the worker with the energy to spare for the compilation of major works of scholarship, but there have been exceptions in every generation, and Sigfús Blöndal was one of them. Almost as soon as he had settled into his post in the Royal Library he began to organize the first of the two great works on which his reputation rests, the *Icelandic–Danish Dictionary*. Over a period of twenty years he directed the small team of enthusiastic scholars whose names appear on the title-page of that work,<sup>1</sup> and the completion of the work in 1924 was hailed by philologists as the greatest advance so far made in Icelandic lexicography. This is not the place to assess the *Dictionary*, and it must suffice to refer to Dr Jakob Benediktsson's survey of the growth of lexicography up to Blöndal.<sup>2</sup>

Even as he laboured at the *Dictionary*, however, Blöndal was developing a second interest which was to come to absorb his energies entirely during the last third of his life. The roots of his Byzantine work may be seen as early as 1910, when he published a popular article on Byzantine science and culture in *Berlingske Tidende*,<sup>3</sup> and it stemmed clearly from his lifelong love of Greek language and literature, which no amount of scholastic pedantry at Reykjavík Latin School could drive out, and which had been greatly strengthened by his youthful friendship with the poet Grímur Thomsen.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his life he found things Greek congenial inspirations to verse, whether in translating classical poets (he published a small volume of these translations in 1901)<sup>5</sup> or in direct poetical outpourings such as *Væringjar á verði*,<sup>6</sup> printed in his last collection of verses, where we also find translations, made over many years, of Sappho, Theocritus, Tyrtæus, Anacreon, Euripides and the modern poet Aristoteles Valaoritis. The absorbing theme was, however, the one for which Blöndal's rare combination of classical and Norse scholarship fitted him singularly well to investigate: the Varangians of the Eastern Roman Empire. For twenty-five years he searched assiduously through a wide range of Western and Eastern

<sup>1</sup> Sigfús Blöndal (ed.), *Íslandsk-dansk ordbog*, redaktør Sigfús Blöndal; hoved-medarbejdere Björg Thorláksson Blöndal, Jón Ófeigsson og Holger Wiehe, Copenhagen, 1920–4.

<sup>2</sup> Jakob Benediktsson, 'Íslenzk orðabókargerð á 19 öld', *Andvari*, 1969, 96–108; cf. also Jón Helgason, *Ritgerðakorn og ræðustúfar*, Reykjavík, 1959, 237–43.

<sup>3</sup> Sigfús Blöndal, 'Den byzantiske Kultur og Videnskaben', *Berlingske Tidende*, 7 March 1910.

<sup>4</sup> Sigfús Blöndal, *Endurminningar*, Reykjavík, 1960, 226ff.

<sup>5</sup> Sigfús Blöndal (trsl.), *Nokkur forngrísk kvæði*, Copenhagen, 1901.

<sup>6</sup> Sigfús Blöndal, *Sunnan yfir sæ*, Reykjavík, 1949, 54–8.

historical literature for evidences of their existence, and wrote the Icelandic text of the book in which he wanted to bring his results to the eyes of others. It is sad indeed to have to record that he barely finished this part; he had written out the text and noted roughly the references for the Icelandic text when he died on 19 March 1950, but had not yet reshuffled it to his liking, nor had he even begun to think of the book in English in which he had intended to present his work to a wider audience. The Icelandic version was seen through the press under great difficulties by his friend Dr Jakob Benediktsson, and appeared in Reykjavík in 1954, but did not attract the attention of the larger scholarly world because of the language barrier.

*Væringja saga* is the base on which the present book is built; but it is not the present book, and it is only proper to account both for the revision and for the second name on the title-page. In 1960 Mrs Hildur Blöndal, Sigfús Blöndal's widow, offered the reviser the opportunity to translate or to revise *Væringja saga*, as his judgment suggested, and this offer was accepted – little did the reviser know what he was letting himself in for! It soon became apparent that a simple translation was out of the question, as the book was not written for an audience already well-supplied with handbooks on virtually every aspect of Byzantine studies. The reviser therefore embarked upon the long, slow task of checking everything from the roots and endeavouring to scour the vast literature in both fields that had appeared since Dr Blöndal's death for new materials. What is now laid before the reader is the result of fifteen years of much-interrupted, but tenaciously continued labour. To anyone who compares the two volumes it will be readily apparent how much has been altered, how much of the old has been excised, and how much new has been put in; it will also be apparent that though Dr Blöndal's book underpins it at every stage, it is not the book that Dr Blöndal left that he or she is reading: hence the second name on the title-page.

That the revision is completed at last is thanks to unselfish help by the numerous friends and colleagues who have come so readily to the aid of the pygmy trying to balance on the giant's shoulders. Four institutions have contributed vital help to the eventual accomplishment of the venture: the British Academy provided a generous grant to enable the reviser to put the book through the crucial stage of checking and final rewriting; the University of Durham provided much-needed help towards research in the early stages. Leeds Polytechnic and Birmingham University provided the vital time without which the script of the book could not have been put together from the

innumerable scattered scraps which had accumulated on individual points over the years; the latter also provided the additional stimulus of learned and enthusiastic colleagues in Byzantine Studies, whose zest and activity gave the reviser the final injection of energy to drive the task through to its end.

To come from behind the façade of impersonality, I would also like to express thanks *in propria persona* to the many individuals who helped with both great and small problems over the years. Firstly, my most grateful thanks are due to Hildur Blöndal for her generosity in giving me the privilege of tackling what has been an ensnaring labour; it is a peculiar pleasure that she has been able to see the work brought to an end, and her husband's last ambition fulfilled, by however unworthy a surrogate. I am also grateful to Professor Peter Foote and Sir Steven Runciman for their generous help and constant encouragement; for support in difficult times I owe much to Professors H. S. Offler, W. V. Wallace and J. H. Delargy; for rescue at a singularly hard time, and for understanding help in a tight corner, my debt to Mr D. E. Davinson is very great indeed. Many others have given unselfish help over a host of problems; so many now that their list would begin to approach that made by the compiler of the Epistle to the Hebrews; but I cannot omit to mention the generous way in which the late Professor Sigurður Nordal, Professor Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Professor Jón Helgason, Dr A. A. M. Bryer, Mr Arnold Taylor, Mr D. M. Pursglove, Mr John Townsend, Dr Mirjam Foot and Dr Jonathan Shepard have all helped with the utmost cheerfulness and readiness when pestered. It would also be ungracious for a librarian to fail to express his thanks to his numerous colleagues in the many libraries in which he has had to search for his materials: most especially the hard-pressed staffs of Det Kongelige Bibliothek, Copenhagen, the National Library of Iceland, that 'arsenal of divine vengeance' the Bodleian Library, the Arnamagnæan Institute, Copenhagen, and my long-suffering colleagues in Durham University Library, The New University of Ulster Library, the Library of the Department of Librarianship, Leeds Polytechnic, the Brotherton Library, Leeds, the libraries of University College and King's College, London, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and not least my chiefs and colleagues of Birmingham University Library, particularly Miss Christine Penney, on whom so much extra labour has fallen as a result of my Varangian adventures. It is a sincere pleasure for the latest and least of 'their' authors to thank the staff of the printing and publishing divisions of the Cambridge University Press for the exemplary scholarliness, courtesy and patience with which they have supported him through the last and

worst stage of the gestation of this book. And, lastly, I cannot end without recording my gratitude to my wife: she married with seeing eyes into the project, and has lived with it with unfailing interest ever since, borne all the upheavals of the stormy passage of this book with exemplary patience, and seen it reach completion without jealousy. Yet neither she nor anyone else is responsible for mistakes that will doubtless be found, even after my best endeavours: there the buck stops with me alone.

Birmingham  
8 January 1978

Benedikt S. Benedikz

NOTE

For general reference, whenever the words 'the author' or 'the present author' appear in the text or the notes, the opinion expressed is that of Dr Blöndal, the reviser not feeling certain enough either to endorse or contradict it, but feeling that it should be made available for the consideration of others. Whenever the words 'the reviser' appear, the opinion is that of B. S. Benedikz, and Dr Blöndal either expressed a different opinion or none at all. All citations of Greek and Russian from actual texts are left in the Greek and Cyrillic alphabets; individual titles or other single words in the main text have been transliterated into Roman letters.

B. S. B.



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## Varangians and their origins

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This book is intended to examine the history of the section of the Byzantine armed forces which went in its heyday under the name of *Væringjar* (Varangians). It is, however, necessary to precede the main history with a brief outline of their origins, and especially to outline the historical and geographical conditions which led to their appearance in the East Roman army.

From the earliest known times Scandinavians have been attracted to Russia on commercial enterprises, especially in search of furs for clothing and, for a long period, of slaves. This traffic originated mainly in Sweden, the country with the most direct access to Russia, especially from Uppland, East Götland and the island of Gotland; the maritime districts of Uppland and East Götland being known in early times as *Roþer* or *Roþin*, and later as *Roslagen* (W. Norse *Róðrslög*), and the inhabitants were named *Róðskarlar*, *Róðsmen*, and lastly, *Roðspiggar*. These people formed the bulk of the Russia traders and they began in time to form settlements in the East; thus the part of the Finnish coast nearest to Sweden was originally settled from there, and is still the Swedish-speaking portion of Finland, whose inhabitants are known in Finnish as *Ruotsalaiset*, and in Swedish as *Ruotsi*. As time went by their numbers increased in Russia proper so that Norse writings refer to the northern and central parts of Russia as *Svíþjóð en mikla* (Great Sweden) or *Svíþjóð en kalda* (Cold Sweden) to distinguish them from Sweden proper. The Slavonic peoples in Russia then took up this name for the Norsemen from the Finns, and called them *Rus*, and from this form it came into Mediaeval Greek as *Rhos*, and found an Arabic form as *Rūs*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> V. Thomsen, *Ryska rikets grunnläggning genom Skandinaverna*, Stockholm, 1882 (hereafter referred to as *Grunnläggning*), 83ff. A survey of the voluminous controversial literature

The great majority of the original inhabitants of Russia were of Slavonic origin, though a number of Finno-Ugrian tribes such as the Permians and the Estonians were to be found in the North-West regions. The Swedes came most often as merchants, and, then as later, merchants had to carry arms for their own protection, and so what had begun as trading journeys often became piratical excursions. Those Vikings who went *i Austrvíking*, abducted people and sold them into slavery in one country, had perhaps a sanctuary and friendly relations with the next-door state, where they behaved as peaceful merchants, and the situation will have been similar in many parts of Russia where the Norsemen were common visitors.

As time passed social and political organization in the eastern lands became more settled, and the trade voyages of the Norsemen more regular and more important economically, and it became necessary to secure the principal trading posts against attack, especially when Swedes began to settle permanently in them. This process was not dissimilar to the immigrant movements in the United States during the latter half of the eighteenth and the first three quarters of the nineteenth centuries, when the white men built fortified trading posts in the Indian territories which gradually grew into the cities of today. It was, however, considerably easier to do this in the Russian plains, because the Slavs were far more accustomed to the Westerners' ways than were the American Indians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the two races had comparatively little difficulty in amalgamating. In due course, when the Swedes established their 'garths' (Russ. *goroda*), these were only fortified trading posts to begin with, but peace-loving local inhabitants soon realized the advantages of living in the comparative safety of the *gorod*, and of being on friendly terms with the inhabitants, and these fortified towns gradually increased in numbers and importance, as in time the Slavs founded their own *goroda*. The name *Gardaríki* became a synonym for Russia in Scandinavia, sometimes for the whole complex of widespread states, sometimes for an individual kingdom that was formed there. Often the Slavs had already formed a petty state (*volosti*) around a fortified city when the Norsemen (who often gained eventual control) came and took up residence. The Slavonic chieftains also made frequent use of their services as allies or

up to 1930 is to be found in V. A. Mosyín, *Варяго-Русский Вопрос, Slavia*, x (1931) 109-36, 343-79, 501-37; for subsequent argument see A. Stender-Petersen, *Varangia*, Aarhus, 1953; D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, London, 1969; P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd ed., London, 1971 (esp. chs 1-2, 9). F. E. Wozniak, *The nature of Byzantine foreign policy toward Kievan Russia in the first half of the 10th century* (Ph.D., Stanford University, California, 1973), is only a conscientious summary of older work, and provides no new evidence or any really fresh assessment.

mercenaries, especially as guards for merchants against robber bands or as supporters in a civil conflict.

It is usually reckoned<sup>1</sup> that the Norse states in Russia began with the coming of Rurik and his brothers to Novgorod in 862, but there are various bits of evidence to show that Norse-ruled petty states existed along the great rivers long before then. It is likely that both Novgorod and Kiev had been established as independent towns some time before the Rusi came and strengthened and fortified them. The first element (*NOV(YI)*) of Novgorod is, for instance, a Slavonic vocable, while its Norse name of *Hólmgarðr* was formed through a part of the town being situated on an island in the adjacent lake. *Kænugarðr* was also formed as a name from a corruption of the Old Russian name for the inhabitants of the district (*Kiyane gorod*).<sup>2</sup> As the Norse sagas also show clearly, there was a close contact between the rulers of these principates and the kings of early Scandinavia, often through marriage contacts and subsequent blood-relationships. The Great Princes of Kiev and Novgorod were known in Old Russian as *stolnyi knyazi* (great princes), which became corrupted into Old Norse as *stólkonungr*, and this became in turn the customary title for the East Roman emperors in Norse sources once our proper period under investigation begins.

The *Rusi* gradually became the ruling class of the area from Ladoga to Odessa, and as time passed they gradually lost their specifically Norse characteristic, though the name remained, until the great and powerful Slavonic people whom they governed took up the name Russians, which they bear to this day.

It is only fair to point out that other explanations of the name *Rus* have been provided, particularly by historians of the Slavophil school. For the purposes of this non-specialist introduction it is enough to refer to the works of F. Knauer, S. Vernadskii, and P. Smirnov.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Vernadskii, *A History of Russia*, New Haven, Conn., 1943-69, I, 275-6 and refs. there.

<sup>2</sup> Thus S. Rozniecki, *Varagiske Minder i den russiske Helledigtning*, Copenhagen, 1914 (hereafter referred to as Rozniecki, *Minder*), 284. Another explanation of the name *Hólmgarðr* has been advanced by H. Rydzewska, 'Холм и новгороде и древнесеверный *Hólmgarðr*', *Известия Академии Истории Материальной Культуры*, 1922, II; her argument is that Холм, 'the height', was the oldest part of Novgorod and that the Norsemen changed it to *Hólm*. For the Kievian civilization generally, see B. D. Grekov, *La culture de la Russie de Kiev*, Moscow, 1947.

<sup>3</sup> F. Knauer, О происхождении имени народа 'Руси', *Труды XI Археологического съезда в Кёве*, II, 1901; see also the same author's articles on the subject in *Indogermanische Forschungen*, XXXI (1912) and XXXIII (1914); also P. Smirnov, Волжские шляхи и стародавние Руси, *Украинская Академия Наук: сборник ист. фил. Виддиду*, Kiev, 75 (1928); a survey by B. Briem, Alt-Skandinavien in der neueren russischen wissenschaftlichen Litteratur (1918-28), *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, V (1930-1), 211-36; G. Vernadskii, *A History of Russia*, I, 76, 96-8; N. S. Derzhavin, *Происхождению Русского Народа*, Moscow, 1944.

Smirnov and Knauer argued that it is more likely that the name derives eventually from the Greek name *Rba* for the river Volga, and the Norsemen who used that river as a highway towards the Caspian Sea had their appellation from the river's name, while Vernadskii argued that it is derived from a branch of the Alani, referred to in a Syrian annal of the sixth century as the *Ros* (? *Roxolani*, 'fair Alans').

The common reaction by a Western European reader to the name *Varangian* is to think of the Byzantine Emperor's famous guards, but it is only right to point out that the name is not solely connected with them, since both before and after the creation of the regiment it was used in another, much wider meaning, both in Russia and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> It has been interpreted in various ways, of which only the most widely circulated need be mentioned here. There is now a general agreement that the derivation is from the O.N. word *vár*, pl. *várar*, 'confidence (in)', 'faith (in)', 'vow of fidelity', in Proto-Norse therefore\* *vāringr*, then *vāringi*, *væringi*. Related words in other Germanic languages are O.E. *wærgenga*, Lombardic *waregang*, O.F. *wargengus*, all derived from a West Germanic prototype \**wāreganga* (-*u*) and meaning 'a foreigner who has taken service with a new lord by a treaty of fealty to him', or 'protégé'. Since there were in the army of the undivided Roman Empire, and in the earliest Byzantine armies, special units of *foederati*, allied troops who were used at times as the imperial life-guards, it was not unnatural that the word *væringi* would take on this meaning, especially as the imperial guards of the third and fourth centuries A.D. were largely composed of Goths.<sup>2</sup>

Since, however, the word appeared in Russia long before it was known to the Greeks, this explanation cannot be used. In Russian it appears as *Varyag*, O.Russ. \**Varegu*. Vilhelm Thomsen has argued that this word was used of Norse merchants and soldiers who entered the protection of Russian rulers, either to do business within their territories or as mercenaries in their forces,<sup>3</sup> and this explanation has been commonly accepted until recent times, when Professor Adolph Stender-Petersen has propounded a new solution which is even more likely to be correct.<sup>4</sup> He accepts the older explanation, that the word *varar* is the base of the word *væringi*, but instead of interpreting it as 'protégé', he maintains that *Væringjar* should be understood as 'men who plight each other troth, who enter a fellowship'. *Varar* then refers to their common liability, one for all and all for one, of all goods and ships in

<sup>1</sup> *Grunnlægning*, 97ff.

<sup>2</sup> This explanation is found in J. Ihre, *Glossarium Suiogothicum*, Stockholm, 1769, II, 1069-70.

<sup>3</sup> *Grunnlægning*, 103-6.

<sup>4</sup> A. Stender-Petersen, 'Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes Væringi; russ. Варагъ' *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, VI (1931), 27-30; reprinted in *Varangica*, 89ff.

their possession. In the meaning 'security', *varar* appears in a stanza by Ólafur Þórðarson the White Poet (ob. 1259).

Allt þá lagði frömuðr frægða  
Fekk sætt af því stillir rekka,  
Snildar skýrs ok *seldi varar*  
Sitt mál í kné lituðs stála.

He, the doer of famous acts [i.e. Earl Skúli], laid all his case in the lap of the eloquent warrior [i.e. King Haakon] and gave security; in return the warlord was given reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

Finnur Jónsson translates this as *afgav edelige Løfter*, 'gave promises on oath', while Vilhelm Thomsen interprets it *Jarlen gav Kongen ganske sin Sag i Vold og stillede Sikkerbed*, 'the Earl surrendered his case completely to the King's mercy, and gave security'.<sup>2</sup> We also have a reference to this action in *Hákonar saga*, ch. 177 *seldi jarl þar festu til*, 'the Earl gave security for this'.<sup>3</sup>

The word has therefore been used primarily by men who entered into a mercantile fellowship and *seldu varar* or *veittu varar* to one another. These merchants were, or needed to be, well supplied with arms, and normally travelled in companies. *Væringi* therefore meant 'companion', a man who has entered into a contractual fellowship of merchants and soldiers, and gives security, accepts responsibility towards his companions, as they accept responsibility for him. Stender-Petersen also adds that the word came to have a wider meaning, first 'merchant from Scandinavia', then, later, 'itinerant merchant', generally a pedlar, without regard to nationality. The northernmost Russians did, however, retain the term as a specific name for a Norseman; thus, in the dialect of Archangelsk, the name *Varyaza* is still used in the meaning 'foreigner', or 'man from beyond the sea',<sup>4</sup> while in Southern Russia the Varangians were more usually soldiers; hence the word came gradually to mean 'Norseman' (in Byelo-Russian *varag* is habitually

<sup>1</sup> F. Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, Copenhagen, 1912-15. Hereafter referred to as FJ *Skjald*, A II, 93, B II, 105.

<sup>2</sup> V. Thomsen, *Samlede Afhandlinger*, Copenhagen, 1928-31, I, 435-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Hákonar saga*, ch. 177 (the version of *Flateyjarbók*, ed. G. Vigfússon and C. R. Unger, Christiania, 1860-9, III, 108).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. V. I. Dal, *Толковый Словарь Живого Велико-Русского Языка*, 4th ed., Saint Petersburg, 1912, I, 404-5, where Вaпер, Вaрега, Вaрежа, Вaруги, are given with the meaning 'mittens', the provenances being (?)Karelia and Olonets. Similarly the *Словарь Русский Народных Говоров*, 4th ed., Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1969, II, 46-9, repeats Dal's tentative Karelian provenance and adds among others Perm, Yaroslavl', Vladimir, Kostroma, Vologda, Tver, Nizhnyi Novgorod, Voronezh, Olonets, Arkhangel and Kazan'. This dictionary also stresses the mercantile origin of Вaпар, giving (I, 64) Вaпар, 'pedlar' (from ?Вор, 'thief'); Вaряга, 'a cunning man'. M. Vasmer, *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Heidelberg, 1953 (under Вaпар) denies this connection; see also Rozniecki, *Minder*, 210 and 41 fn. 2. (I am very much obliged to my former colleague Mr D. M. Pursglove for help with this note - BSB.)

used to mean 'tall, burly man'). Gradually too, the Russians began to differentiate between themselves and the Varangians. Thus an annal from Novgorod that mentions Varangians for the last time in 1201 refers to a treaty made with them in 1195: article ten of this treaty states 'If a Varangian demands his goods from a Russian, or a Russian from a Varangian, and the debtor denies the debt, then the creditor shall bring twelve men as witnesses and have them swear an oath (to the truth of the original transaction), and then seize his property.'<sup>1</sup> Later the word was largely used in Russia of Germans, or Roman Catholics generally, *vera varyazbkaya* equalling *vera latinskaya*, 'faith of the Varangians', i.e. in opposition to Greek Orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> We should also note that the Arabs learnt the word in Russia, and it appears in Arabic in the form *varank*, and is used as a generic name for Scandinavians or denizens of the Norse world, while the Baltic Sea is named *Babr Varank*, 'Varangian Sea' by Arab writers.<sup>3</sup>

In Greek the word *Varangos* was first used in the meaning 'Norseman', but since the regiment of life-guards from that race became especially well-known in the Empire the meaning narrowed to 'mercenary of Norse origin'.<sup>4</sup> Later it was used generally of Germanic mercenaries, especially of Englishmen, as will be explained.<sup>5</sup>

Stender-Petersen has also produced a similar explanation of the name *Kylfingar* (Russ. *Kolbyag(i)*), which he connects with the Norse word *kolfr*, 'association' (cf. *hjúkólfr*), and the *Kylfingar* will therefore have been a company of Norse merchants who operated in Russia, though the term never became as widespread there as *Væringjar*.<sup>6</sup> There is evidence, however, that they reached as far south as Byzantium, where they were known by this name (Gr. *Kulpingoi*), and entered the Emperor's service.<sup>7</sup> The late eleventh century law codex *Russkaya Pravda* shows that Varangians and Kylfings had certain privileges; thus their word was more readily believed than that of Slavonic subjects of the Russian prince; thus they could sometimes free themselves by a

<sup>1</sup> M. Vladimirskii-Budanov, *Хрестоматия по истории Русскаго Права*, Киев, 1871, I, 96; 'Мирная грамота Новгородцев с немцами 1195, вип. 10: Ожо емоги скот варягоу на Роусин, или Роусини на варяз а ся евозаприт то 12 миж Послухи идет роте взмет свое.' The word *væringi* is used in *Þiðreks saga* (ed. H. Bertelsen, Copenhagen, 1904, I, 30-1, 40, 105, 347-8, 360) of a Norse or Scandinavian itinerant merchant.

<sup>2</sup> Mosyin, *Варяго-Русский вопрос*, *Slavia* X, 117; on Varangian Christianity in the eleventh century cf. Rozniecki, *Minder*, 197ff. <sup>3</sup> *Grunnlæggning*, 99.

<sup>4</sup> The first recorded use in Greek sources is by Cedrenus; *G. Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzæ Ope*, ed. I. Bekker (CSHB), Bonn, 1838-9, II, 509, in 1034.

<sup>5</sup> See below, pp. 141ff.

<sup>6</sup> So A. Stender-Petersen, *Varangica*, 89ff. One of the most notable older interpretations is that by B. Briem, 'Kylfingar', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, IV (1928), 40-8. Briem assumes that it is a Norse translation of the name of an obscure Finno-Ugrian tribe, the *Vota* (O. Russ. води, Finn. *Vadjalaiset*) because the *vadja* (Finn. *vaaja*) means *Kylfa*, 'club' in O.N.

<sup>7</sup> See below, p. 82, n. 3 for yet another explanation.

simple oath where others had to bring witnesses to be freed of accusation.

There is one other possibility to explain the word *Varangian*. It is sometimes used in modern Icelandic in the meaning 'cheerful, lively youth',<sup>1</sup> and the feminine plural form *væringar* is used to mean 'discord, quarrel'. It is by no means impossible that these meanings existed in Old Icelandic, whatever their origins, and *Væringi* then meant at first 'quarrelsome fellow', and then attained the less pejorative meaning. I do not think, however, that this explanation is better than Stender-Petersen's.

Finally the most recent attempt at explanation must be mentioned. This is made by the Russian scholar J. D. Bruckus, who considers that the word *Væringi* (*Varangos*, *Varyag*, etc.) is derived from the Turkish word *varmak* or *barmak* (participial form *varan*), 'walk' 'to travel on foot', and that it was originally used of Norse merchants and vikings; right from the time when, in the eighth century, they began to make frequent journeys down the Volga, and that it originated with the Bulgars who at one stage held lands along that river: in turn the word spread to Kiev, which was ruled by the Khazars, and then further south. Similarly *Kylfingr* (*Kolbyag*?, *Kulpingos*) was a transliteration of the Turkish translation *köl-beg*, pl. *köl-begler*, for 'sea-king'.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation has found favour with F. Dölger, but it may be objected that though Bruckus rightly observes that the Varangians are most often observed as merchants in Old Russia, there is no need to search in such an unrelated language as Turkish to explain a word which can easily be explained from the Varangians' and Kylfings' own tongue, from which Stender-Petersen's explanations are perfectly satisfactory in the opinion of the present writers.

The custom whereby Varangians became mercenaries in the service of Russian princes gradually became more widespread. In the first instance they entered the service of the Swedish princes who founded and ruled for many generations over Norse kingdoms in the East, in Novgorod, Kiev, and other places. There they are sometimes referred to as special 'friendly troops' (Russ. *Družbina* from *drug*, 'friend'), probably by analogy with the *Hetairia* frequently referred to in Byzantine military phraseology in the sense of mercenaries in the Imperial service. The Khazar kings on the north side of the Black Sea are also said to have *Rusi* (Varangians) and *Slavi* (Russians) in their service.

<sup>1</sup> B. Halldórsson, *Lexicon islandico-latino-danicum*, ed. R. Rask, Copenhagen, 1814; also S. Blöndal, *Islandsk-Dansk Ordbog*, Copenhagen, 1920-4, both under *væringi*.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. Bruckus, 'Warjager und Kolbjager', *Acta Seminarii Kondakov*, 1935, 81-102; see also a notice of this article by F. Dölger, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* (hereafter referred to as BZ), 35 (1935), 480.

Besides entering the service of others, it will have happened not infrequently that Norsemen went on purely piratical excursions on their own account along the great rivers of Russia, all the way south to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and made depredations there. Early in the ninth century there is mention of 'Russians' who are engaged in piracy both on the northern and southern side of the Black Sea.<sup>1</sup> Regular piratical expeditions on a large scale to the East Roman empire failed, however, as did open warfare against the emperors, as the Byzantine state, even after the disasters in the Bulgar wars in the early ninth century, was still too powerful a military organization for little sea-forces, and moreover several of the emperors and their leading generals were warriors of a quality that made privateers and small hostile groups – and indeed quite formidable opponents – give them a wide berth. We shall return to the Russian contacts with Byzantium later. The commercial contacts were, however, both more frequent and more important than the warlike expeditions, and stretched as far as Arab countries and even the Chinese empire, as may be seen from the great number of Arabic coins found in Scandinavian hoards in Russia (especially in Sweden) and from Chinese writers of the great epoch of the T'ang dynasty when (in the ninth and tenth centuries) the Chinese empire reached all the way to the Caspian Sea, who refer to tall, blue-eyed, red-haired men living in the area, who may well have been Norsemen.<sup>2</sup>

The advances of the Norsemen will, as has been stated, have been along the great Russian rivers to begin with, as the way was easiest by water, along the Duna and the Neva to begin with, then via Novgorod to Volchov, and then along the Volga to the lands of the Bulgars and the Khazars. Next would be the advance along the Dnieper to Byzantium, via Kiev, which, after the Rusi of Kiev had overthrown the Khazars in the 960s (Itil, the capital, was conquered in 969) became the main route to the Empire.<sup>3</sup> It is along this road that we find the place-name evidences that testify to the unquestionably Norse character of the Varangians.

<sup>1</sup> For references to Russian piracy in Byzantine Asia in the early ninth century, see the *Vita* of St Gregory of Amastris in V. G. Vasilevskii, *Русско-Византийская Исследования*, Saint Petersburg, 1893, 1–73, esp. 61ff.; also *Acta Sanctorum*, Februarii III 21 Februarii, 278–9; also the *Vita* of St Stefan of Sourzh (or Sugdaea) in Vasilevskii, *Исследования* 77–9. For two extensive studies of the earliest collisions between Byzantium and the Rusi see A. A. Vasilev, *The Russian Attack on Constantinople in 860*, Cambridge, Mass., 1946 and, by the same author, 'The Second Russian Attack on Constantinople', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 6 (1961), 161–225.

<sup>2</sup> C. P. Fitzgerald, *Son of Heaven*, London, 1933, 199–201.

<sup>3</sup> F. Braun, 'Das historische Russland im nordischen Schrifttum des 10. bis 14. Jahrhundert', *Festschrift Eugen Mogk*, Halle am Saale, 1924, 150–96.

Along the lower part of the Dnieper, to the south of Ekaterinoslav, are mighty waterfalls which are named пороги ('thresholds') in Russian if they extend right across the river, and заборы ('fences') if they only straddle a part of it.<sup>1</sup> There are in all eleven of these 'thresholds' and six of the 'fences' over a distance of some fifty miles, and in the last fifty years they have been harnessed by the Soviet authorities to supply driving-power for great hydroelectric works. In the Middle Ages, however, they were regarded as great traffic hazards. Constantine VII makes several references to them in *De Administrando Imperio*,<sup>2</sup> where he gives the names of the principal ones ῥωσοτί ('in Russian', i.e. Norse) and σκλαβιστί ('in Slavonic', i.e. in Old Russian), and his evidence removes all doubt as to what people are meant when at that time a reference is made to the *Rhos*.

Constantine first describes how the ships of the Rhos come all the way from Nemogarda (Novgorod) and other towns, and gather into a fleet at Kioava (Kiev), also called Sambatas (O.N. *Sandbakki*, 'sand-shore'). The Slavs who are subjects to the Rusi cut great trees down in the winter and make canoes of them, transport them down the Dnieper and sell them to the Rusi in Kiev. The Russians then embark on their new boats and break up the ships on which they came to Kiev, removing from them oars, thwarts and any other useful loose articles. Then, in the month of June, they travel down the Dnieper to *Vitizevi* (Vytichev) and thence down to the cataracts. There they leave their goods on board and wade along the shallows themselves, dragging the boats, or pushing them over the difficult patches.<sup>3</sup>

The emperor calls the first cataract Ἐσσοῦπη, which he says means in both Russian and Slavonic 'Do not sleep'. According to this interpretation it should be called не спи, and V. Thomsen postulates that Constantine's original MS had Νεσσοῦπη. Eiríkur Magnússon has conjectured that the Norse name was originally *Nes uppi* (lit. 'upper promontory'), which is quite a likely solution, though Karlgren interprets it as *Súpandi* (lit. 'slurping').<sup>4</sup>

Constantine's cataract is called by him Οὐλβοροσί in Russian, but

<sup>1</sup> The Varangians sometimes called the river Népr or Nípr; Rozniecki, *Minder*, 292.

<sup>2</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. G. Moravcik and R. J. H. Jenkins, London and Dumbarton Oaks, 1949-62 (hereafter called *DAI*, 58ff. The excellent commentary on this chapter by Professor Obolensky (*DAI*, II, 16-61) gathers together a mass of detail and provides a wise discussion to which the reviser feels it sufficient to refer here once and for all.

<sup>3</sup> *DAI*, 58-59. A full examination is given by Thomsen (*Grunnlægning*, 50-64); more recent investigations of this topic are by J. Sahlgren, *Vikingar i osterled, Namn och Bygd*, XVIII (1930), 131-48, and A. Karlgren, *Dneprfosserners nordiske-slaviske navne*, Copenhagen, 1947 (hereafter referred to as Karlgren: *Dneprfosserne*); see also *DAI*, II.

<sup>4</sup> *DAI*, 58-9; *Grunnlægning*, 56; Karlgren, *Dneprfosserne*, 106.

Ὀστροβουνιπράχ in Slavonic, which he interprets as 'island of the waterfall'. This name may be interpreted as O.N. *Úlfarsey* or possibly *Hólmsey* (?) and O.Russ. островный праг (mod. порог), 'island waterfall'. This probably refers to two waterfalls, nowadays named Сурский and Лочанский; Thomsen conjectures that the name was *Hólmfoss* and derived from three rocks just above the Lochanskii fall, or else from a tree-covered islet just by the Surskii fall, though the former is more likely.<sup>1</sup>

The third cataract mentioned by the emperor is the Γελανδρί, which he interprets as meaning in Slavonic *ἤχος φραγμαῶν*, 'the sound of the fall', but he has gone astray here, since Γελανδρί is clearly the same as O.N. *Gjallandi* or *Gellandi*, 'shouter', which matches the present-day name of Звонец, an apt name for the fall, since its sound can be heard for miles.

The fourth cataract in Constantine's list is named by him Ἀειφόρ in Russian, and Νεασήτ in Slavonic, and is so named because pelicans build their nests in the rocks within the waterfall. This fall was regarded as the most dangerous one of all of them, and is named in modern Russian Ненаситецкий. Νεασήτ is the O.Russ. неясит or Mod.Russ. неясит, which can mean 'pelican', and the emperor may have so understood it, but pelicans are not to be found in that region, and an alternative meaning could be from сыт, 'replete', as 'impossible to satisfy', as the modern name suggests, and V. Thomsen has conjectured that it is because it is the only fall where the river never quite covers all the rocks in the great spring floods. From this is also conjecturable the Norse name *Æfari*, 'never navigable', since the Rusi could never draw their ships along the river bed, but had to bypass the fall on land. Thomsen has suggested that the Norse name could be from *Eyforr* or *Æfor*, 'keen, ever excited', but it is just as likely that it derives from *Eifærr*, 'never passable', on the obvious grounds. There is also a conjecture by J. Sahlgren, that the O.N. name was *Eiðsfors*,<sup>2</sup> while Karlgren has pointed out that *aist*, 'stork', is also used to mean 'pelican' (originally from German).<sup>3</sup> Near Pilgård, near Slite in Gotland, there has been discovered a rune-stone which states that Hegbiarn (? Heggbjörn) and his brothers, Roþuisl and Oystain (? Róðvísl and Eysteinn) raised a stone in memory of their brother Rafn at Rufstain (? Hrófsteinn) in the south, and had travelled as far as Aifur.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *DAI*, 58-9 and refs. there; Karlgren, *Dneprfosserne*, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Sahlgren, 'Vikingar', *Namn och Bygd*, xviii (1930), 146-7.

<sup>3</sup> Karlgren, *Dneprfosserne*, 109-17.

<sup>4</sup> H. Pipping, 'Om Pilgaardstenen', *Nordiska studier tillägnade Adolf Noreen*, Uppsala, 1914, 175-82. An illustration of this stone is in T. J. Arne, *Det store Svitjod*, Stockholm, 1917, 49, fig. 1, where the stone called in Russian Руаный Камень, 'the cleft stone,' is