

Susana Torres Prieto, *The Early Slavs: The First Centuries of Eastern Europe* (Routledge Studies in the History of Russia and Eastern Europe 47), London–New York, Routledge 2025

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The stated aim of this book is to present “an introductory and comprehensive history of the Slavic-speaking peoples who inhabited Eastern and Southern Europe during the 700-year period stretching from the first archaeological and historical records to the establishment of their first organized polities” and their subsequent history into the thirteenth century.

At its core, it seeks to answer a central question: who were the ancient Slavs? The text also aims to show the extent to which the Slavs contributed to the formation of Europe in the Middle Ages. Its author, Susana Torres Prieto, is Associate Professor in the Humanities at the Universidad Instituto de Empresa (Madrid), Spain; and is also a senior researcher at the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. She is an expert in Slavic Studies and her research focuses on medieval Slavic literature and culture. The present book is a distant adaptation of an earlier one ‘Los Antiguos Eslavos’ (Editorial Sintesis, Madrid, n.d. [2020]), and like that one, seems to be aiming for the academic textbook market as well as the general reader. It covers a wide geographical scope over a formative period (c. 530-1230) and is framed as a primer for anyone looking to understand the intricate cultural and political foundations of Eastern Europe. Providing a unified overview of the origins of modern Eastern and Southern European nations, the work contextualizes Slavic polities through their complex interactions with powerful neighbours such as the Byzantine and Frankish Empires.

Written in an accessible style, the book features a straightforward thematic layout organized into seven chapters, each summarizing a broad historical topic.

It attempts to address some overlooked perspectives, in particular it incorporates research on the role of women, the significance of Jewish communities in the region, and the impact of slavery and slave trading within early Slavic societies. Each chapter has separate endnotes and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources which makes checking references easier. These are followed by an appendix (pp. 183-208) that consists of a fairly extensive table in six columns that provides a comparative chronology for the period AD 530-1230 to help students and researchers navigate the dense timeline of early medieval history. This outlines selected events of various types (and historical weight) in various Slavic polities against events in the Byzantine and Frankish Empires, and in the areas of religion and arts and culture. This will help the reader unfamiliar with the area and period to place events mentioned in the text in a broader temporal context. Rather puzzlingly, there are absolutely no illustrations in this book, not only of some of the things and places mentioned, but more frustratingly, there are no maps at all which is difficult to comprehend in a book clearly intended to be used by a non-specialist readership.

The first chapter introduces the evidence available for the study of these 'first centuries of eastern Europe', namely historiographic sources and archaeological material. The author outlines some of the difficulties involved in using these sources and considers the extent to which they can be relied on as an objective account of reality. She mentions the Byzantine sources, mostly chroniclers such as the sixth to seventh and ninth centuries, and manuals of 6th/early 7th centuries and the tenth century. Epigraphic sources are not mentioned. The Latin sources again consist of some 8th and 9th century chronicles and annals, but there are also some accounts of Frankish and Carolingian missionaries into Slavic territory, most dating to the 11th-12th centuries. A third group she draws on are texts relating to Arabic or Jewish travellers in eastern Europe, of the ninth and tenth centuries, finally there are texts written in the form of annals or chronicles in the vernacular of various Slavic polities, in addition to hagiographical texts. The author introduces the specific character and purpose of these sources. Strangely very few of the copious written sources for the latter part of the timespan covered by this book (i.e., of the 12th to 13th centuries) are mentioned. In the final section of the chapter (pp. 23-26) the archaeological evidence and its interpretation are discussed.

The author turns in chapter two to what the sources mentioned above reveal about "the earliest Slavs". She examines their first historical appearances and social organisation through "the testimonies of those who entered into contact with them at some point and the archaeological remains we have managed to find". In practice, however, the chapter largely consists of compiled extracts from written sources; the section tellingly entitled 'the first news of the Slavs' (pp. 31-40) presents extensive verbatim quotations from three Byzantine accounts concerning Slavic activity in the Danubian frontier zone, though with relatively little sustained exegesis. No mention is made of the use in some of the debates on Slavic origins of archaeogenetic or linguistic evidence (such as hydronyms etc.). The subsequent

section on “social organization”, though still heavily dependent on written testimony, attempts to draw on a somewhat wider range of evidence. A single paragraph presents archaeological evidence for house and settlement forms, which the author interprets as indicating nuclear family units, probably related by kinship, practising what she describes as a “semi-nomadic pattern of inhabitation”: temporarily occupying and exploiting an area, using it as a base for raiding and plundering neighbouring communities before moving on. Again based mainly on the written sources, tensions are discussed in descriptions of Slavic “hospitality” and reports of their harsh treatment of captives within what is characterised as a slave-owning society. The brief treatment of social organisation and governance (pp. 44-46) also relies primarily on external written sources, supplemented by a limited use of historical linguistics.

The third chapter (pp. 53-78) is devoted to trade and slavery, and includes a lengthy discussion of Jewish merchants operating in eastern Europe. Drawing primarily on written sources from the tenth to early twelfth centuries, the author presents a picture of “globalised trade” linking Slavic territories with regions beyond them. This is followed (pp. 63-73) by an extended treatment of the slave trade and its role in the emergence of Slavic states, as well as its connection to the circulation of other commodities (including silver dirhams) along the same routes, whereby “archaeology [no source cited] is incessantly (sic!) uncovering a trace of money and blood” (p. 63). Slavery is presented as one of the principal motors in the formation of Slavic polities. The reader looks in vain for any discussion of the transition within these polities from a system incorporating slavery to forms of feudal dependency (including the Russian *kholop*). The subsequent discussion of several trans-European trade routes is somewhat muddled, conflating evidence from distinct chronological phases and omitting consideration of the town-based trade that developed in the region between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Frustratingly, little insight is offered into what archaeology reveals about the commodities traded, the physical character of trading sites, systems of weights and measures, means of transport, or other material aspects of exchange, which are instead presented largely through selected textual excerpts. Nor is there any sustained engagement with evidence for production (craft activity, specialisation, raw materials, etc.). Even the bibliography provides no indication, by way of further reading, of the substantial scholarly literature on this complex and important subject.

The longest chapter (Chapter 4, pp. 79-129) surveys the emerging political formations that later developed into medieval nations. Seven regions are treated in turn (Moravia, Bohemia, Poland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and Kyivan Rus’), each followed through extended political chronologies: Moravia and Croatia to their tenth- and eleventh-century collapse, the others into the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. The author frames state formation around familiar criteria, dynastic continuity, governance, economic viability, and relations with powerful neighbours (and the consequent influence of Western and Eastern political models

on Slavic elites, though with less attention paid to engagement with steppe polities such as the Avars, Khazars, and Pechenegs). In practice, however, the chapter unfolds largely as a sequence of ruler-centred narratives focused on succession disputes and military conflicts, with limited engagement with the social, economic, and institutional structures that underpinned early state formation. As a result, governance is rarely examined as an evolving system. Fiscal regimes, tribute mechanisms, legal cultures, and administrative practices receive comparatively little attention, while the social dynamics supporting institutional consolidation remain in the background. Within this framework, state formation appears driven primarily by exchange routes, elite initiative, and the contingencies of dynastic history rather than by deeper socio-economic processes. Critical factors such as population density, resource mobilization, and the effects of intensified agriculture are largely absent from the explanatory account of emerging political hierarchies.

The fifth chapter (pp. 130-150) covers Christianisation, treating it as the decisive contribution to later Slavic identity, relegating over five centuries of paganism to a few pages near the chapter's close (pp. 144-145). It examines the religious transition of Slavic societies and the establishment of ecclesiastical structures, presenting conversion as a multifaceted process shaped by political necessity, economic ties, and cultural transformation. Christianity provided access to literacy, literature, and wider cultural forms in which Slavic societies subsequently flourished. Conversion is presented as a strategic move by early rulers to consolidate authority, facilitating a shift toward a model of sacral kingship inspired by the Hebrew Bible, in which rule was legitimised through a perceived covenant with God. For Torres Prieto, the central significance of Christianisation lies, however, in the birth of Slavic literacy (hence an extended encomium (pp. 134-137) to Cyril and Methodius, presenting the creation of the Slavic scripts as a crowning achievement). The discussion then surveys the progress of Christianisation of the polities among the West, South and East Slavs and concludes with a comparative reflection on the enduring divergences between Latin and Orthodox traditions in liturgy, theology, monasticism, iconography, and Church-State relations, including the jurisdictional tensions between Rome and Constantinople over the definition of the faith itself.

The sixth chapter (pp. 151-174) concentrates on Slavic written culture, an area clearly aligned with the author's own expertise and one clearly linked with modern Slavic identity. While rich in detail, the chapter's strongly textual focus at times sits somewhat heavily within a volume intended as a broad historical synthesis. The initiation of Slavic literacy is presented not merely as linguistic development but as a Byzantine political instrument, integrating Slavic regions through the creation of the Glagolitic and Cyrillic scripts and the Slavization of Christian texts. The failure of this project in ninth-century Moravia, and the expulsion of Methodius's disciples in 885, is interpreted as closing the possibility of a Slavic-language church in the West, which instead entered the Latin cultural sphere, part of a different literary universe. Defining Slavic "written culture" largely through Church

Slavonic, the chapter consequently gives limited attention to Western Slavic literary developments once they adopted Latin. The discussion concentrates on the textual culture of *Slavia Orthodoxa*: tracing the formation of the Church Slavonic canon through its ninth century beginnings, the principal 10th and 11th century manuscripts, and gradual functional shift from Glagolitic to Cyrillic and later linguistic forms. Church Slavonic emerged as the first medium through which Slavic elites could articulate their own voices, shape foundational myths, and consolidate newly Christianized states. Torres Prieto argues that Orthodox Slavic literary culture followed a logic distinct from the Latin West, privileging translation, recombination, and collective spiritual preservation over individual authorship. Far from reflecting stagnation, this vibrant translation-based culture, shaped by a fluid biblical canon and the circulation of apocryphal and popular secular works, is presented as a dynamic and cohesive foundation of Slavic identity grounded above all in the East Slavic Orthodox tradition that cannot be judged by Western standards. Some space is also devoted to non-canonical and multi-ethnic written practices, including the wax tablets, birchbark letters, and runic graffiti preserved from Novgorod and the “Kyivan Letter” from the Cairo Geniza.

The final chapter, ‘Epilogue: Identities’, reflects on the evolution of Slavic ethnic and cultural roots up to the 13th century. The author argues this period was a turning point, as fluid clan-based affiliations transitioned into institutionalized polities. She highlights the roles of marginalized groups, such as women and Jews, the impact of Byzantine and Frankish imperial interactions, and how these medieval boundaries provided a blueprint for modern national identities.

Taken as a whole, *The Early Slavs* is an ambitious effort to provide a much-needed synthesis of a vast and difficult field. Torres Prieto has undertaken the demanding task of presenting seven centuries of political, cultural, and religious transformation across an immense geographical space, and she does so in prose that remains consistently clear and accessible. The thematic organization allows her to foreground certain questions (trade, slavery, Christianisation, literacy) that she feels of importance in forming the identity of modern Slavic nations. Particularly strong are the chapters on Christianisation and written culture, where the author’s expertise is most evident and where she succeeds in conveying both the intellectual richness and the long-term cultural consequences of the adoption of Slavic literacy. The volume will undoubtedly serve as a useful point of entry for students approaching the early medieval Slavic world for the first time, not least because of its comparative chronological apparatus and its sustained attempt to situate Slavic developments within a wider European framework. Yet precisely because the book sets itself so broad and integrative an agenda (in a limiting 208 pages), certain structural and methodological limitations become more apparent, and these deserve closer consideration.

Above all, and it is appreciated that this is a “history” book in a series called “studies in the history of...”, one cannot fail to be disturbed by the rather instru-

mental and superficial treatment of the truly vast body of archaeological material and literature in the creation of this text. For a book published in the 2020s, one would have expected more effort from both author and publisher to adopt a far more interdisciplinary approach. Although archaeology is mentioned, it seems to function largely as background support, there to illustrate the information contained in the written records rather than as an independent source of information. In fact the author devotes very little space even to this, on pp. 23-24, she proclaims “the archaeological evidence available is quite limited, mainly because the Slavs do not seem to have been keen or expert in working with metals (either as tools, jewels (sic), or weaponry), as confirmed by many written sources, and also because their burial practices do not seem to have involved any form of internment”. They had no monetary economy until later on, so there’s no good coin dates on many Slav sites (to allow tying them to written history), and “in their constructions they seem to have been using wood rather than stone in most buildings, so again there is little to work with”. When the author quotes ‘the archaeological literature’, most of it is drawn from a single book, a quarter of a century old.

The assertion that early Slavic archaeological evidence is “quite limited” in the entire period from the 5th to 13th centuries due to a lack of skill or material remains is an oversimplification that ignores several decades of robust scholarly findings. Contrary to the claim of metallurgical incompetence, early Slavs were proficient in metalworking, supported by evidence of widespread local bog-iron smelting and smithing for the production of iron agricultural tools, weaponry and household items. Finds of intricate bronze or silver jewellery such as the ubiquitous clasps, temple rings, fibulae and pendants, made from imported and local raw material are common across both settlement hoards and burial sites. Furthermore, the absence of burials by interment in the early period (but not the Christian centuries after c. 1000 AD) reflects a cultural preference for cremation (urns, pits, or mound/kurhan cemeteries), this may limit skeletal preservation but still provides rich data on social status and contacts. While the reliance on timber for dwellings and fortifications (gords – an important aspect of the landscape hardly mentioned in the book) means that stone ruins are rare, but sophisticated excavation methods allowing recovery of postholes, hearths, and floor layouts provides a clear picture of Slavic lifeways, social organization and craftsmanship. Finally, the scarcity of numismatic finds does not preclude precise dating; archaeologists establish reliable chronologies through pottery seriation, dendrochronology, and the presence of datable objects imported from outside. Far from being “limited”, the material record is substantial and a source of information in its own right, though requiring a specialized methodological approach to be fully understood. There is a vast literature on this material and its interpretation that this book almost totally ignores.

Finally, although the author carries her narrative through the so-called High Middle Ages (between roughly 1000 and 1300 AD), it must be said that the reader is left without a fuller picture of the profound transformations that reshaped Central

and Eastern Europe in precisely this time. This era witnessed sweeping demographic expansion, institutional consolidation, and economic integration, processes that reconfigured settlement patterns and systems of authority across the region. While some of these changes paralleled developments in the West, others (particularly in the East Slavic lands) followed more distinct trajectories whose consequences endured. These varied developments form the essential backdrop against which the later medieval history of Slavic Europe unfolded.

These quibbles aside, *The Early Slavs* represents a useful and wide-ranging attempt to introduce aspects of a complex and still-contested field to a broader readership. While some sections would have benefited from closer engagement with recent archaeological and interdisciplinary scholarship, greater analytical depth in the treatment of written sources, and a clearer integration of material and political history, the book nonetheless succeeds in drawing attention to the formative significance of the Slavic world within medieval Europe. It will stimulate discussion and, one hopes, encourage readers to pursue the subject further in more specialized studies. If it does not fully resolve the question of who the “ancient Slavs” were, it at least ensures that the question remains a central and productive one.