

Yurii Soroka

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PERSONALITIES**



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CONTENTS

Askold and Dir (IX century)	6
Rurik (?—879)	8
Oleh the prophet (?—912 (922)).....	10
Ihor Rurikovykh (878—945)	12
Princess Olha (?—969)	14
Sviatoslav (931 (938) — 972)	16
Volodymyr the Great (960 (963) — 1015)	18
Yaroslav the Wise (circa 978—1054)	20
Anna Yaroslavna (1024 (1025) — after 1075)	22
Nestor the Chronicler (?—1013 (1014))	24
Volodymyr Monomakh (1053—1125)	26
Yurii Dolgoruky (long-armed) (?—1157).....	28
Daniel of Galicia (1201—1264)	30
Ivan Fedorov (1510—1583)	32
Dmytro Vyshnevetskyi (Balda) (? —1564)	34
Severyn Nalyvaiko (? — 1597).....	36
Vasyl-Kostiantyn of Ostroh (1526—1608)	38
Samiilo Kishka (1530—1602 (1620))	40
Petro Konashevych Sahaidachnyi (?—1622)	42
Mykhailo Doroshenko (? — 1628)	44
Meletii Smotrytskyi (1577—1633)	46
Petro Mohyla (1596—1647)	48
Ivan Barabash (?—1648)	50
Bohdan Khmelnytskyi (1595—1657).....	52
Maksym Kryvonis (?—648)	54
Yeremiah Vyshnevetskyi (1612—1651)	56
Danylo Nechay (1612—1651)	58
Ivan Bohun (?—1664).....	60
Ivan Vyhovskyi (?—1664)	62
Yurii Nemyrych (1612—1659)	64
Petro Doroshenko (1627—1698)	66
Ivan Mazepa (1639 (?) — 1709).....	68
Yurii Khmelnytskyi (1641—1685).....	70
Samiilo Velychko (1670—1728?)	72
Pylyp Orlyk (1672—1742)	74
Feofan (Eleazar) Prokopovych (1681—1736).....	76
Hryhorii Skovoroda (1722—1794)	78
Ivan Kotliarevskyi (1769—1838)	80
Mykola Pyrohov (1810—1881)	82

Taras Shevchenko (1814—1861)	84
Mykola Kostomarov (1817—1885)	86
Platon Symyrenko (1821—1863)	88
Pavlo Chubynskyi (1839—1884)	90
Mykhailo Starytskyi (1840—1904).....	92
Mykhailo Drahomanov (1841—1895)	94
Mykola Lysenko (1842—1912)	96
Illia Mechnykov (1845—1916).....	98
Mariia Zankovetska (1854—1934).....	100
Dmytro Yavornytskyi (1855—1940).....	102
Ivan Franko (1856—1916).....	104
Sholom-Aleichem (1859—1916)	106
Volodymyr Vernadskyi (1863—1945)	108
Pavlo Skoropadskyi (1873—1945).....	110
Olha Kobylianska (1863—1942)	112
Andrii Sheptytskyi (1865—1944)	114
Mykhailo Hrushevskyi (1866—1934)	116
Vasyl Stefanyk (1871—1936)	118
Ivan Piddubnyi (1871—1949)	120
Lesia Ukrainka (1871—1913).....	122
Solomiia Krushelnytska (1872—1952)	124
Kazimir Malevich (1879—1935)	126
Symon Petliura (1879—1926)	128
Volodymyr (Zeiev) Zhabotynskyi (1880—1940)	130
Nestor Makhno (1888—1934).....	132
Ihor Sikorskyi (1889—1972)	134
Ostap Vyshnia (1889—1956).....	136
Yevhen Konovalets (1891—1938)	138
Yosyf Slipyi (1892—1984)	140
Mykola Khvyliovyi (1893—1933)	142
Golda Meir (1898—1978)	144
Ivan Bahrianyi (1906—1963)	146
Olena Teliha (1906—1942)	148
Serhii Koroliiov (1906—1966).....	150
Roman Shukhevych (1907—1950)	152
Stepan Bandera (1909—1959)	154
Yurii Berezynskyi (1912—1932)	156
Mykola Amosov (1913—2002)	158
Mykola Lemyk (1914—1941).....	160
Tetiana Yablonska (1917—2005)	162
Vasyl Sukhomlynskyi (1918—1970).....	164

Borys Paton (b. 1918)	166
Jack Palance (1919—2006).....	168
Serhii Parajanov (1924—1990)	170
Terry Sawchuk (1929—1970).....	172
Lina Kostenko (b. 1930).....	174
Liubomyr Guzar (1933—2017)	176
Carl Sagan (1934—1996).....	178
Vasyl Symonenko (1935—1963).....	180
Viacheslav Chornovil (1937—1999).....	182
Vasyl Stus (1938—1985)	184
Valerii Lobanovskiy (1939—2002)	186
Bohdan Stupka (1941—2012)	188
Roberto Kozak (1942—2015).....	190
Volodymyr Ivasiuk (1949—1979).....	192
Nazarii Yaremchuk (1951—1995).....	194
Leonid Kadeniuk (1951—2018)	196
Oleh Blokhin (b. 1952)	198
Kvitka Cisyk (1953—1998)	200
Mark Paslavsky (1959—2014)	202
Serhii Bubka (b. 1963).....	204

ASKOLD AND DIR (IX CENTURY)



Askold and Dir (Radziwiłł, or Königsberg Chronicle)

The period of Princes Askold and Dir rule over Kyivan Rus' has been researched so insufficiently that it is impossible to confirm or deny any data about their lives registered by the chronicles. In fact, there are several versions as to the origin of the ancient Princes. According to the academic historiography, Askold and Dir reigned over Kyiv in the 860—880s. In 866 *The Tale of Bygone Years* informed, "...Askold and Dir went on a campaign to the Greeks and surrounded Tsargorod with 200 ships..." According to the chronicle, Emperor Michael had to pay the indemnity and sign a peace treaty favouring the Rusiches.

However, if the chronicle confirms the existence of Askold and Dir, it does not specify who those people were. As to Askold, Nestor's chronicle calls him one of Rurik's governors (called *voyevodas*). On the contrary, the Kyivan Chronicle of approximately 1037—1039 runs that Askold and Dir were brothers and legendary Kyi's descendants. Later researchers, though, question the authenticity of this part of the Kyivan chronicle. They claim that at first the chronicle mentioned Askold only. Dir's name was added later. The fact that Askold and Dir ruled Kyiv is disproved by the details of their burial. According to the chronicle, Oleh's soldiers killed both Princes at the same time. Then a question arises, "Why were they buried in different parts of Kyiv at a distance from one another?" Nestor mentions the fact, "*And Dir's tomb is behind Saint Oryna*".

The fact that Askold and Dir reigned at different time is fixed in the work of Al-Masudi, Arab geographer of the tenth century. He claimed that "Dir was the first Slavic tsar". Following his works, historians believe that Dir ruled after Askold, mainly in the 870—880s. In that case, on entering Kyiv, Oleh's soldiers killed just Dir while Askold had died earlier.

As to the coverage of the early years of the Kyivan Rus', it is worth mentioning a study by Omelian Pritsak, a Ukrainian historian, who had to immigrate to the USA in 1943. Some parts of the scholar's research



The Death of Askold and Dir. Print by F. Bruni, 1839

support academic historians' conclusions about the lives of Askold and Dir. However, the books indicate some interesting differences. In the scholar's opinion, in 860, the campaign to Byzantium was organized by two Viking military leaders under the names Hasting and Bjorn. It was they who headed the troops and led them from Tmutarakan through the Sea of Azov to Constantinople. After the Byzantines agreed to pay a ransom, Hasting and Bjorn retreated. According to some Scandinavian sources referred to by Omelian Pritsak, Hasting went to Britain while Bjorn stayed in Polotsk to reign. It was in Polotsk that he was killed by a Viking named Lot Knaut, also known as Helg, or Oleh the Prophet. It is not hard to guess that Hasting and Bjorn were actually Askold and Dir. It is up to the reader to decide which version about the Princes' lives is true. However, the fact that each of them contributed a lot to the Kyivan state history is undoubted.



Silver coin *Askold*, issued by the NBU

RURIK (?—879)

Prince Rurik is one of those images in the Ukrainian history that are most controversial, and few reliable sources are available to help and



Rurik. From the Title reference book.
1672

find the historical truth. Since time immemorial, scholars broke too many lances, published thousands of books and completed a huge number of historical studies of Rurik. Since the medieval times, his image has been used for fictional and scientific purposes as well as imperial propaganda, and due to all that the image is now buried under numerous pseudo-historical details. Without joining the dispute on their truthfulness, we may consider what Nestor the Chronicler wrote about Rurik in *The Tale of Bygone Years*.

Explaining the origin of Kyivan Princes' dynasty, Nestor referred to

the tale about the three brothers' arrival from the Norman lands. The Slavs decided to take the state power in Rus' over.

"...From Germans the three brothers came with their relatives and a lot of soldiers. Rurik came to the throne in Novgorod, his brother Syneus — near the White Lake, and Truvor — in Izborsk. And they started to fight everywhere. From those settled Vikings the name Rus' originated. After those Vikings the land of Rus' got named".

The brothers' names mentioned by Nestor correspond to Scandinavian Hrorekr, Signiutr and Torvarr. It was this fact that supported the version about Norman origin of Rurik dynasty. As the chronicle reports, two years after the Vikings settled in Rus', brothers Syneus and Truvor died and the power was concentrated in Rurik's hands. However, some historians believe that Rurik's brothers did not exist in fact and their names can be interpreted as merely inadequate translation of the Swedish words 'his clan' (*sine hus*) and 'faithful wife' (*thru varing*).

"And he came to the throne there and distributed districts to his men ordering them to found towns: one of them — Polotsk, some other — Rostov,

one more — Biloozero (the White Lake). But the Vikings were the newcomers there. The first settlers in Novgorod were the Slovens, in Polotsk — the Kryvyches, in Rostov — the Merya, in Biloozero — the Ves', and in Murom — the Muroms. And Rurik ruled over them all".

The chronicles do not tell about Prince Rurik's further life. It is known that in 864 Novgorod inhabitants rebelled against Rurik's rule. As a result, the prince had to take very cruel measures to keep his power. As the Nykon chronicle of the first half of the XVII century goes, by Rurik's order, Vadym the Brave, a representative of Novgorod nobility was killed, and "a lot of other people from Novgorod, his advisers" were killed, too.

It should be noted that Prince Rurik is often mistaken for Danish konung Rurik from Jutland who was in service with Carolingian Dynasty and lived approximately at the same time to which *The Tale of Bygone Years* indicates, telling about the founder of the ruling dynasty in Kyivan Rus'. However, contemporary historiography cannot prove or disprove the theory due to lack of sources. Pursuant to the chronicle data, Prince Rurik died in 879. He left his son Ihor who later came to Kyiv throne.



V. Vasnetsov. Rurik's arrival in Ladoga