Normanism: What's in a Name?

In voluminous literature on the Norman controversy which has been published during two and half centuries of debates in Russia and other countries, the main subject of dispute, i.e. ‘the Norman theory’, or ‘Normanism’, has rarely been clearly defined. Some assumptions held by authors of various works led Leo Klein to the conclusion that ‘Normanism’ had been differently defined and there was some varying scale of Normanism, or ‘the Normanist Ladder of Hell’, from the mere recognition of significant role of Varangians in early Russian history to the claim about creation of Kievan Rus' itself by Varangians [Клейн 1999: 100].

The Normanism has often been portrayed in the last sense – as an assertion that the Varangians who invaded from Sweden into Rus' conquered the Slavic tribes and created the Russian state. This interpretation has been seen by many Russian historians as absolutely unacceptable, for political reasons. These political reasons have very rarely been outlined explicitly, but, basically, the assertion about the Russian state being founded by Scandinavians has been seen as an attempt of undermining of the present state's legitimacy. The ‘anti-Normanists’ claimed that the foundation of Kievan Rus' was fully independent from any foreign influence and only Slavic tribes contributed to it. This is the Normanist controversy in brief (for more detail, see [Melnikova 2012]).

There are some difficulties with the anti-Normanist arguments because the Norse let many archaeological traces within the area of early Rus': burials with apparently Scandinavian grave goods in the layers of the settlements in the North-West Rus' along the coasts of Lake Ladoga, Ilmen' River and other sites [Duczko 2004; Korpela 2008; Jackson 2009]. A runic inscription was found in the lower layers of the Staraya Ladoga settlement [Лебедев 1985: 211]. There are also multiple records in Russian chronicles and Old Norse sagas about the Scandinavians travelling to and staying in Rus' [Pritsak 1977; Lind 2006; Jackson 2008; Shafer 2009]. The Russian-Byzantine treaties of 911 (912?) and 945 which are preserved in the Primary Chronicle, contain names many of which had been reliably identified as Scandinavian long ago [Thomsen 2010 (1876): 68-69]. These traces of Scandinavians in Rus' do not allow one to simply reject the Scandinavians' participation in the foundation of the Russian state. For this reason, the present-day anti-Normanists often underrate the archaeological data and dismiss the records of chronicles, which unequivocally describe the Varangians as the Scandinavians. They bluntly and emotionally claim that the Varangians were only Slavs or representatives of Slavic tribes, perhaps West Slavic.

The origin of the idea that the Varangians were Scandinavian, especially from Sweden, has been typically credited to Gerhard Friedrich Müller who took part in the first public dispute on this subject at the Imperial Academy of Science in St. Petersburg in 1749-1750. His dissertation On the Origin and on Behalf of the Russian People (Latin Origines gentis et nominis Russorum) became the starting point of the whole debate. Later on, some Russian scholars claimed that the agenda of his dissertation included the following points: that the Varangians were Swedes who came and conquered Rus', and that the Russian state had been founded by these invaders. So, naturally, this theory was strongly disputed by Mikhail Lomonosov as unacceptable and politically harmful. Lomonosov's position has been represented as having methodological superiority over the views of German historians, such as Müller. This one is a very common statement in the Russian historiography: “Müller's Normanist scheme ... conflicted with his opponents’ more correct methodological supposition of the independent development of the Slavs” [Пештич 1961: 230].

In fact, these debates were also a confrontation of methodological approaches to the history. Müller employed the modern methodology based on extensive study and comparison of different sources. He had done a vast amount of research on Russian chronicles and documents, especially during his expedition into Siberia. The so-called “Müller's briefcase” which contains copies of the papers from the local government organs of several Siberian towns is still a valuable primary source on the Siberian history.
His critic’s idea of methodology was different. Mikhail (or Mikhailo, in the widespread spelling variant of that time) Lomonosov was a chemist, physicist and mine surveyor, he did little study on Russian history before the beginning of the debates. Lomonosov had only begun to study Russian chronicles in 1751, before he wrote his work *The Ancient Russian History*. Before the mid-18th century, Russian historians were dominated by the annalistic tradition. They would collect chronicles, read them and make compilations. A.N. Nasonov wrote: “However, newer data allow us to provide a significant correction to our idea. Not only in the 17th century, but even in the beginning of the 18th century, at the time of Peter the Great, there still were some attempts at official annalistic writing” [Насонов 1969: 478]. Some histories such as the Kievan Synopsis and *The History of Russia* written by Vasily Tatischev were fully based on the earlier chronicles. In 1722, Peter the Great ordered that the Synod should bring together all extant chronicles from abbeys, to provide material for compiling a new official universal chronicle. This ordinance was not obeyed. Thus, like many other Russian historians at that time, Lomonosov entirely relied on chronicles and the Kievan Synopsis, a 17th-century history work which, in its turn, was also based on chronicles.

The key difference of these approaches is how the chronicles are perceived and treated. While within the framework of the modern methodology chronicles are expected to be critically examined, in order to establish the facts more reliably, the Russian historians at that time followed them uncritically, using the method of mere retelling and compilation.

The result of the debates between Müller and Lomonosov was the strengthening of the older methodology (i.e. that of taking the chronicles at face value). The subsequent works by Lomonosov, Shcherbatov, Tatischev, Karamzin and others, bear clear signs of this approach. Although it was stated in the 20th century that Müller's works on early history of Rus' were confiscated and destroyed [Pritsak 1977: 249], his publication in the *Sammlung Russische Geschichte* and some of his other works have been accessible to scholars. The protocols of the debate, recording mutual objections by Müller and Lomonosov, also survive in the Archive of the Imperial Academy of Science in Saint-Petersburg. Moreover, a printed copy of the dissertation turned up in the early 2000s in the rare book collection of the State Public Historical Library in Moscow, and along with other works by Müller was re-published in 2006 [Миллер 2006]. Therefore, presently there is no reason to state that his works were actually lost.
Yet Müller's defeat had for decades blocked the way for advance of the modern methodology in the Russian studies on history and, in particular, it had a damaging effect on studies concerning Russian-Scandinavian relations in the early Old Rus'.

Thus, the newly discovered text of Müller's principal work allows us to revise some fixed ideas of what his theory was like. A detailed study of the first debate in the Imperial Academy of Science would answer the question what was Müller's actual point of view.

Did Miller identify the Varangians as ‘Swedes’?

Müller had never stated that the Varangians were specifically Swedes. He wrote in his dissertation: “We declare about another folk, by whose people Russia had not only been settled, but had received the ruler and its name. This folk, however, had been initially different from the Slavs by its language and habitation, but further had merged with them in the course of many centuries, so that they were impossible to distinguish between... No doubt, the most respectable audience, they are to be recognized as Varangians who have been mentioned in the chronicles and Russian histories: although it is not known that any folk had specially been called by this name in Scandinavia, but it could be proved that they came out from Scandinavia, not from other countries” [Миллер 1749: 20].

Later on, he wrote another work based on his dissertation, On the Peoples Who Inhabited Russia since Olden Times, where he put it this way: “In the whole neighbourhood of the East Sea [the present Baltic Sea] no people, which had been called exactly Varangians, ever existed... they may have consisted of all Nordic folks and of people of all kinds of birth” [Миллер 1788: 85]. Before that, Müller also wrote that the Varangians were warriors or seaman: “They had been called Varangians for their skills of seafaring, in which they had been mostly trained, or warrior skills; from the ancient word varr, by which the Scandinavians called the war” [Миллер 1749: 20].
But how did the point of view that the Varangians were the Swedes come into being? This statement first appeared in the second report on the Müller’s dissertation, which had been written by Lomonosov on Oct 23, 1749: “Müller supposes that the Varangians, from whom came Ryurik with his brothers, had not been Slavs by language and origin, as the author of the Kiev Synopsis had stated, but he wants to prove that they were Scandinavian, i.e. the Swedes” [Ломоносов 1952: 30].

Since the Müller dissertation initially had been dedicated to the Official Birthday of the Russian Empress Elizabeth, the dispute in the Imperial Academy of Science was laden with a sharp political overtones. Before this discussion, Russia had won the war against Sweden, and the statements of the Müller dissertation, especially in the light of Lomonosov’s interpretation, had been perceived as an attempt at Swedish revanchism and even disparagement of the Russian throne. Lomonosov wrote in his report: “In that I leave it to a skilled man for reasoning that if he recognises that Ryurik and his ancestors were Swedes, whether any dangerous consequence could be from this” [Ломоносов 1952: 41].

Müller considered that the name ‘Varangians’ was the nomination of the whole range of Nordic peoples, including at least the Swedes, the Norse and the Danes. In broader sense, this nomination referred to all peoples of the Baltic region and the Slavic tribes too. But Lomonosov in his report emphasized only the Swedes. Thus, the identification of the Varangians as specifically the Swedes was Lomonosov’s idea, not Müller’s.

The current data about the Viking Age allows to conclude that Müller was more correct, in spite of the fact that he wrote his work at the time when most information known presently was unavailable. Even the sagas were considerably less explored. Today’s archaeological data show that diverse groups of the Scandinavians actually lived in Rus'. The lands in the basins of the Ladoga Lake, Ilmen’ River and Upper Volga were inhabited by the Swedes from the Middle Sweden and Birka, and area of Upper Dnieper (around Gnezdovo) was inhabited by the Norse and probably the Danes, because the materials of the cemeteries show relations with Hedeby [Duczko 2004: 256-257]. The Scandinavians moved along the rivers and travelled very far from Scandinavia, for example to Balkans [Fischer 2008: 87].

The word ṛōþs, according to John Lind’s work, meant Swedish warfare on sea and the Scandinavians in broader sense in the mid-10th century. He stressed that this name was used as ethnic term for the Russians since the 12th century [Lind 2006: 256-257]. Similar semantic shifts – from a professional term to an ethnic term – are not uncommon in history. First, such term would become the name of the state (or politonym) and, later, this name would be adopted by the people as an ethnic endonym. For example, the present-day ethnic terms such as Kazakh and Uzbek were the names of tribal unions and states in the 15th century. The word Rus’ is likely to have passed the same transformation, losing any semantic relationship with the Scandinavians.

But, as we can notice, some scholars, who studied the origin of the Rus’ and carefully examined the sources, failed to trace this transformation of the word’s meaning [Danylenko 2004: 2-5], although the Nestor chronicle clearly says that “From these Varangians the Rus' got their name”. Therefore, one should study not only the origin of the name Rus', but its subsequent transformation as Müller indicated. Lomonosov’s way was totally erroneous.

The superiority of the Varangians?

The main part of the Normanist controversy has been the discussion of the allegedly superior role of the Varangians in Rus' and their role in Russian state foundation. To my opinion, this is the key difference between the Russian disputes about the Varangians and Western historical works on the Viking Age. Western historians write about this period in a much quieter tone, even despite the fact that the Vikings actually held the superiority in many European countries at their time. In Russia, any hint at the leadership of the Varangians, ever if this had been recorded in the chronicles, has led to acute debates and political charges.

Western historians remark that the Scandinavians, according to the accounts in sagas, travelled to Rus' without intention of conquering this country. John Shafer explored in his
dissertation the saga-accounts of Norse far-travellers and their motivations. He noticed that the Norse came to Rus' for different reasons: exile from Norway, military service, love and marriage, Christian missions, and exploration of eastern lands far away from Rus'. Other motivations such as trade, raids or power, Shafer considers to have been of minor importance [Shafer 2009: 140-207]. These conclusions are supported by archaeological excavations in north-west Russia. G.S. Lebedev made a remarkable note that the Vikings, according to the sagas and runic inscriptions, did not know the tribes of Rus', although the Baltic tribes were well known by them. By contrast, Russian chronicles give lists of the Slavic tribes comprised by Rus’. Lebedev saw this as evidence that the Varangians were primarily warriors or traders, lived in towns and communicated mostly with princes and their servants [Лебедев 1985: 198]. This data do not allow to conclude that the Scandinavians had played any superior role in early Rus' or had been founders of the Russian state.

Müller did not claim that the Varangians held superiority over the Slavs, however he remarked that they raided and conquered Novgorod for short time. He wrote: “However, what we can show from history is that the Scandinavians always sought to obtain their glory by expeditions to Rus’.” [Миллер 1749: 24]. He also remarked, that, according to the accounts of Russian chronicles, the Slavs would often rise against the Varangians and expel them from Rus'. During the debates, Müller wrote in his response to Lomonosov: “But between glory and shame, there is a widest field for history, filled by numerous facts and events which can either happen to any of peoples or be heard in stories about them” (cit. ex. [Ломоносов 1952: 68]).

But Lomonosov ascribed to Müller the statement of the Scandinavians’ superiority: “It is true that Müller says: ‘Your great-grandparents were named the Slavs from their glorious affairs [ slava is 'glory' in Russian – D.V.], yet, in discord to this, in his whole dissertation he seeks to show the opposite, that the Russians were beaten, safely robbed by almost any country, the Scandinavians overpowering them, ravaging, exterminating them by sword and fire, the Huns forcibly seizing Kyi in the war” [Ломоносов 1952: 21]. His position was based on the Kievan Synopsis, a compilation written in the late 17th century. This work claimed an ancient and glorious history of the Slavs. Lomonosov followed its ideas and made in his work The Ancient Russian History a very remarkable note: “Comparing the then condition of power and majesty of the Slavs with their current state, I only see a barely discernible increment... From this, one can doubtlessly conclude that the Slavic peoples’ majesty had been on almost the same level for about thousand years” [Ломоносов 1766: 7-8]. Sticking to this point of view, Lomonosov would interpret any account of Scandinavian raids on Rus' as an attempt at disparagement of the contemporary state.

The excavations in the Staraya Ladoga settlement, which had been the major site of the Varangians in the land of Rus', have confirmed Müller’s point of view. The Varangians had inhabited and probably possessed the Staraya Ladoga for short period [Jackson 2009]. Lebedev remarks that the layer of the Staraya Ladoga settlement, which approximately corresponds with the mid-9th century and the expulsion of Varangians from Rus' (859-862 A.D.; after the raids of Ragnar Lodbrok), contains traces of severe fire which devastated the settlement [Лебедев 1985: 212]. Since traces of fire in the layers are commonly interpreted as consequences of war and assault, this implies that the expulsion of Varangians was probably followed by an assault and burning of the Staraya Ladoga settlement. Other Scandinavian outposts in the Eastern Baltic suffered similar fate. For example, the Swedish fortified town located in Grobin area, Latvia, had been assaulted and burned down by the Kurs tribes near 800 A.D., and the inhabitants of this town were expelled [Noonan 1986: 328; Джаксон 1991: 126]. The same may have happened in Staraya Ladoga [Джаксон 1991: 155; Jackson 2009: 439-440].

The whole corpus of available sources indicates that the Varangians were later hired by the Kievan princes as warriors and seamen for protecting lake and river coasts, in particular the southern coasts of Ladoga Lake and Volkhov River, which were part of the main route into the Rus', from the Viking raids [Джаксон 1991: 157]. Trade contacts between Scandinavia and Rus were intensive [Jackson 2008]. According to the accounts of sagas, in the 10th and 11th centuries several
Scandinavian konungs were exiled to Rus' and lived in Aldeigjuborg (i.e. the Staraya Ladoga settlement) [Лебедев 1985: 221]. At the same time, Rus' never saw really devastating Viking's raids, nor large tributes comparable to “Danegeld” or the redemption which the King Charles the Bald paid to Lodbrok in order to save Paris from destruction, nor appearance of something like the Danelaw in England. A comparison of the consequences of the Viking's raids on the West and on the East shows that raids on the East were less successful for the Vikings. This conclusion is supported by Russian chronicles which had already been well-known at the time of the Müller-Lomonosov debates. Moreover, the establishment of the centralized royal power in Sweden occurred later than in Rus'. Regular taxation in the lands of Novgorod was introduced by Olga in the 9th century, whereas such process in Sweden was completed only in the 13th century [Korpela 2008: 21-22].

Thus, there was no basis for the claim of the superior role of the Varangians in the Rus'. Lomonosov used bad argument and emotional charges.

What did Müller ‘reject with reproach’?

The debate became more heated because Müller dismissed the accounts of the Kievan Synopsis. Lomonosov wrote: “... he promises to cite foreign authors where Russian authors do not suffice; however, contrary to this promise, he rejects Russian authors, often with reproach... that he did unfairly and defiantly” [Ломоносов 1952: 19]. This statement of Lomonosov's had been used as a basis for the notion of Müller's lack of objectivity and bias for a long time. Yet a closer look at Müller's dissertation shows that he used both foreign and Russian chronicles. Moreover, since 1732 Müller had been publishing the Sammlung Rübsische Geschichte, the first academic journal on the Russian history. It is in this journal that a German translation of some text from the Nestor chronicle soon appeared [Пекарский 1870: 318]. Müller made use of the Nestor chronicle and the Life of Princess Olga in his dissertation.

There was only one Russian source which Müller harshly criticized in his dissertation. This was the Kievan Synopsis. Müller wrote: “The identification of the Varangians as the Slavs can be refuted instantly. Nothing is written about the roots of the Varangians in the Kievan chronicle and all reliable Russian histories. From where did the author of the Synopsis obtain his information? He made speculative guesses, attributing the language, in which the descendants speak, to ancestry without any grounds” [Мüller 1749: 22].

By rejecting the Kievan Synopsis, Müller also crushed Lomonosov's theory of the Russian history and the origins of the majesty of the Russian Empire. Lomonosov had not any other arguments beside the Kievan Synopsis and merely retold all assertions from this work about southern roots of the Slavic tribes, descent of the Russians from the Roxolani, who lived in Lower Danube area, and the ancient people Rhos located between Dnieper and Don rivers. He stated: “... this request of Müller's is needless and for the presence of the Roxolani in the North near the Novgorodian Slavs, there is no need to bring them from the South, wherefore we can clearly prove that the Land of the Roxolani stretched from the Black Sea to the Varangian Sea [i.e. the Baltic Sea – D.V.] and to the Ilmen' Lake in the ancient time” [Ломоносов 1952: 27]. He assumed that there had been a large Slavic state since antiquity, which later evolved into the Russian Empire. Müller categorically rejected this idea. This fact probably became the starting point of the harsh debates in the Imperial Academy of Science.

Lomonosov's point of view has not been confirmed by further research on the early history of the Slavic tribes. The initial area of the Slavic tribes, as reconstructed by today’s researchers, was not so large as Lomonosov had believed. The Ilmen Slavic tribes were newcomers who had settled a previously unpopulated area between the Finno-Ugric and the Baltic tribes in the middle of the first millennium A.D.

Birth of the Normanism

Thus, Müller's opinion was not so dramatically offensive as many Russian scholars presumed.
He had reconstructed the early history of Rus' as accurately as possible for his time of the lack of the sources and inaccessible archaeological data. His assertions were later confirmed by studies of numerous and different sources such as annals, sagas and archaeological sites. Was he the creator of the ‘Normanism’? It is possible to say, he was not.

The first work which made allegations of Normanism was Lomonosov's report on Oct 23, 1749. Challenged by the weakness of his own argument and Müller's refutation of the Kievan Synopsis, Lomonosov wildly misrepresented Müller's position in his report addressing the Chancellery of the Imperial Academy of Science. He ascribed to Müller the following theses:

1. The Varangians were the Swedes.
2. The word ross came from Swedish or Finnish, was brought to Rus’ by the Varangians and then was appropriated as the name of Russians (i.e. Slavs).
3. The Varangians conquered Novgorod, they would always defeat and rob the Slavs, due to the superiority of the Swedes over the Slavs.
4. The Varangians founded both the Russian state and the Ryurikid dynasty, which was a Swedish dynasty, which meant the inability of the Slavs to create a state of their own.

These strawman theses had been simply reversed by Mikhailo Lomonosov who made from his side the following theses:

1. The Varangians were purely Slavic.
2. The Slavic tribes controlled the territory equivalent to the whole territory of the 18-century Russian Empire, and the invitation of Ryurik for reign meant an invitation of a Slavic prince by another Slavic state.
3. There were not any wars between the people of the Novgorod and the Varangians.
4. The Slavic tribes had hegemony over the Eastern Europe, which meant the Slavs' glory and majesty.

This report led to long debates in the Historical Assembly of the Imperial Academy of Science, which came to the end on March 6, 1750. The protocols of these debates survive, which allows to trace the course of debates. The protocols were published in 1952 in Complete Works by Lomonosov. After this, Müller was fired from the position of the president of the Imperial Academy of Sciences University on June 20, 1750 and he had been expelled from the academic position on Oct 8, 1750.

Lomonosov won the debates by the administrative decision of the Chancellery of the Imperial Academy of Science, not by his arguments. He wiped out Müller from the studies of the early history of Rus’ and later wrote his own work on the Russian history. Moreover, the Printing-house of the Imperial Academy of Science printed the Kievan Synopsis 18 times promoting it as the main book on the Russian history. The last edition of the Kievan Synopsis was issued in 1861 [Миллюков 2002: 30].

The structure and the main idea of the Kievan Synopsis deeply influenced the Russian historiography. It was the basis for Lomonosov's and Scherbatov's works and even Karamzin's The History of the Russian State. They and other scholars adopted its main idea: “The basis of the scheme is assertion of the primordial unity of the Russian national state and interpretation of its disintegration as accidental and abnormal phenomenon” [Пресняков 1938: 2].

This was an unscientific view on the Russian history, but it deeply affected the Russian historiography. Presently, there are still some historians who do not reject this point of view even under pressure of the facts known from source studies and archaeological excavations. If they cannot defend their position in academic debates, than they turn to the weapon tested by Lomonosov, such as political charges and straw-man attacks at their opponents [Мельникова 2013:
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The article presents a case study of an episode in the 18th-century historiography of Old Rus', regarding a clash between M.V. Lomonosov and G.F. Müller on the origin of the Ryurikid dynasty and the identity of ‘Varangians’. The ‘Normanist controversy’ has so far received relatively little attention from Western scholars. It is helpful to focus on the origins of the controversy, its initial political meanings and methods used by each party. The analysis of the whole discourse of the polemics reveals that the notion of ‘Normanism’ has been much of a strawman constructed by its early opponents, first of all, by Lomonosov. The actual views of Müller did not differ significantly from today’s mainstream in the studies of Russian-Scandinavian contacts.

Keywords
18th century, 18th-century historiography, Mikhail Lomonosov, Gerhard Friedrich Müller, Normanism, Normanist controversy, Old Rus’, Varangians

About the Author
Verkhoturov, Dmitry Nikolayevich, independent, Moscow
E-mail: wehr@yandex.ru