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Eastern Kentucky University

Historical Text and Historical Archaeology: Hunting the Narrative of Kievan Rus

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Requirements of HON 420  
Spring 2017

By  
Ivory Spears

Mentor  
Dr. Jennifer Spock  
Department of History

## Historical Text and Historical Archaeology: Hunting the Narrative of Kievan Rus

By: Ivory Spears

Mentor: Dr. Jennifer Spock

**Abstract Description:** This paper focuses on the historical narrative of Kievan Rus between 860 to 1240 and the importance of historical archaeology in order to gain a clearer understanding of its history. Very few sources written in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Rus survive today. The *Primary Chronicle* is the most widely known and available account of the history of Rus for historians to use. However, scholars utilize the chronicle with caution because the original oldest surviving chronicle was written almost two centuries after the first dated entry. We can expect that not everything written in the chronicles was accurate and that changes would have been made. Since the *Primary Chronicle* is a fundamental piece of literature for historians studying the history of Kievan Rus, I will be closely examining passages from Samuel Cross's translation of the *Primary Chronicle* to understand the once-official narrative and identify archaeological evidence that either supports or challenges the official narrative. I will discuss issues regarding: the so-called Norman Controversy, Khazar influence in Kiev, construction and utilization of boats, traditional Scandinavian boat graves, the organization of the city of Kiev, and literacy among non-elite townspeople.

**Keywords and phrases:** Archeology, Kievan Rus, Norman Controversy, *Primary Chronicle*, Varangian, history, Russia.

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## Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my thesis mentor Dr. Spock of the History Department for providing me with unfailing support and encouragement for the last three years. She was always available to listen and made me feel like a priority. She has consistently given me moral support and the freedom I needed to complete this paper.

I would also like to thank my friends and family for supporting me through this process. My boyfriend and I spent many long nights in the library, in which he continuously supported me and kept me from going home! This paper would not have been possible without either of their support.

## Historical Background of Rus and the Textual Sources

Kievan Rus was a federation of Slavic tribes ruled by the Rurikid Dynasty from the 9th to mid-13th centuries in the regions of the modern-day countries of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Very few sources written in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13th centuries in Rus survive today. The *Primary Chronicle* is the most widely known and available account of the history of Rus for historians to use. The *Primary Chronicle* was first compiled in Kiev around 1113 CE. and chronicles the history of Kievan Rus from 852 -1110.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, historians thought that the *Primary Chronicle* was first edited and compiled by the famous monk Nestor; modern historians believe that the *Primary Chronicle* is a collection of previously written annals that were edited and compiled by multiple monks.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the original copy of the *Primary Chronicle* did not survive. The oldest surviving copy of the *Chronicle* was written in 1377. The *Primary Chronicles* that scholars reference, *The Novgorod First Chronicle*, the *Laurentian Chronicle* or *Tale of the Bygone Years*, and the *Hypatian Chronicle*.<sup>3</sup> Utilize the chronicles with caution because the original oldest surviving chronicle was written almost two centuries after the invitation to the Varangians. We can expect that not everything written in the chronicles was accurate and that changes would have been made.

Similar to the *Primary Chronicle*, the *Novgorod Chronicle* is a collection that chronicles the history of Novgorod between 1016 and 1472.<sup>4</sup> Novgorod is one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Cross and Olgerd Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds., *The Russian Primary Chronicle Laurentian Text* (Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Oleksiy Tolochko, "On Nestor the Chronicler," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 29, (2007): 51.

<sup>3</sup> Cross and Wetzor, *Primary Chronicle*, 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> C. Raymond and A.A. Shakhmatov, eds., *The Chronicle of Novgorod 1016-1471*, trans. Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes (New York: AMS Press, 1970) 3.

earliest towns in Russian history. Furthermore, starting in the twelfth century the princes of Novgorod were elected by the governing officials of Novgorod and could be dismissed from the position by the Novgorodians. For this reason, Novgorod was considered its own Republic and acted independently of Kievan Rus in many situations. Many ancient manuscripts originated in Novgorod, including the *Short* and *Expanded Russkaia Pravda*.

The first Russian code of laws was written during the reign of Yaroslav the Wise (1015-1054); it was known as the *Ruskaia Pravda* or *The Russian Law*.<sup>5</sup> There are two sections of the *Ruskaia Pravda*: the *Short* version and the *Expanded* version. Initially, under Yaroslav, the *Pravda* consisted of a short list of appropriate compensations and punishments for various crimes including theft and murder. After Yaroslav's death, his sons added a number of additional ordinances to reinforce princely authority.<sup>6</sup> Yaroslav's *Pravda* and his son's *Pravda* create the *Short Pravda*. Like the *Primary Chronicle*, the original *Ruskaia Pravda* did not survive. There are two important versions of the *Short Pravda*, the Academy copy and the Archaeographic copy, both of which are dated to the fifteenth century. Vernadsky believes that the Academy copy is the closest version to the original.<sup>7</sup>

During the 12th century, the *Ruskaia Pravda* was enlarged and revised; this is the *Expanded Pravda*. The completion of the *Expanded* version is generally dated to the second half of the twelfth century or early thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The *Expanded* version

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<sup>5</sup> W. T. H. Jackson, ed., *Medieval Russian Laws*, trans. George Vernadsky (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1965), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Vernadsky, *Medieval Russian Laws*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Vernadsky, *Medieval Russian Laws*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Vernadsky, *Medieval Russian Laws*, 17.



introduces penal law on issues concerning theft, murder, assault, money-lending, interest, slavery, serfdom, and inheritance. The earliest known copy of the *Expanded Pravda* is the *Synodal* copy, dated to 1282, but historians consider the *Trinity* copy to be closest to the original.<sup>9</sup>

I have chosen to focus primarily on the *Primary Chronicle*, *Novgorod Chronicle*, and *Rusaskaia Pravda* while excluding the few surviving didactic sermons and literary poems because the *Primary Chronicle*, *Novgorod Chronicle* and *Rusaskaia Pravda* were created to provide ostensibly accurate information. Furthermore, this paper focuses specifically on Kievan Rus from 860 to 1240: the creation of Kievan Rus as a major state organization until the Mongol invasion and subsequent end of Kievan Rus.

In a region and a time period for which primary sources are scarce, archaeological data should not be underestimated. Archaeology is the study of humans in prehistory and history, through the recovery and analysis of material culture. Archaeology involves surveying, excavation, and analysis of the data collected in order to learn more about the past. In North America, archaeology is a sub-discipline of anthropology, which is the study of humans, behavior, and societies in the past and present. In Europe, archaeology is considered its own discipline or sub-discipline of history.

There are three components of archaeological work: field work or excavation, lab work or classification, and interpretation or analysis. Excavation is often misunderstood to be the main aspect of archaeology, but the interpretation of material remains that have been excavated is extremely important. The first concern for classification and

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<sup>9</sup> Vernadsky, *Medieval Russian Laws*, 13.

analysis is the accurate and exact description of all the artifacts collected. This usually involves collaboration with biologists, botanists, zoologists, dendochronologists, geologists, and petrologists. The second concern is with dating the artifacts accurately. There are three main dating techniques: cross-dating, relative dating, and absolute dating. Once material remains are classified and dated, the last task of an archaeologist is to analyze the material evidence to make an interpretation or historical judgement.

More than 99% of the human past occurred within prehistory so that without written sources the only way to understand prehistoric societies is through archaeology. However, that does not mean that archaeology is not useful for understanding historic or literate cultures and societies. Historical archaeology is a form of archaeology that deals with historic places, people, or societies in which written records are available to use as context for cultural material. For many literate cultures, like Kievan Rus, the only surviving literary sources are either incomplete or potentially biased. The ability to read and write was normally restricted to the elite classes in early historical societies. Consequently, many of the surviving texts reflect the point of view of the elite class while the interests and cultural values of the lower class are often left out. Therefore, archaeology can provide support through the material record in order to better understand the history of humans.

Since (but not because of) the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992 more and more archaeological data and publications from the Soviet era are being released and re-evaluated by archaeologists and historians all over the world. Historians and archaeologists are finding out more about the way people lived in Russia in the past than they have ever known before thanks to the considerable and extensive

archaeological research that was conducted in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The profession of archaeology expanded in Russia after the Soviet Union was formed in 1922. Archaeological activity was low between 1910 and 1920 in Russia due to WWI and the Civil War, but over 8,000 archaeological works were published between 1918 and 1940; that number increased by one and half times during the 1950's, and then doubled in the 1960's.<sup>10</sup>

Archaeology has provided new information and new perspectives on questions that historians have been asking for decades regarding the history of Kievan Rus. It has challenged and enhanced some issues such as the so-called Norman Controversy with its related question of what group ruled the early Slavic community around Kiev. However, it has also illuminated aspects of life in Kievan Rus such as: the construction of boats, traditional Scandinavian boat graves, organization of cities, and a possible change in our understanding of literacy among non-elite townspeople.

Since the *Primary Chronicle* is a fundamental piece of literature for historians studying the history of Kievan Rus, I will be closely examining passages from Samuel Cross's translation of the *Primary Chronicle* to understand the once-official narrative and identify archaeological evidence that either supports or challenges the official narrative. Many scholars are referencing archaeology to answer questions about the creation of Kievan Rus that the possibly inaccurate *Primary Chronicle*, *Novgorod Chronicle*, and *Ruskaia Pravda* may have deliberately or inadvertently left unanswered.

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<sup>10</sup> Bulkin, Klejn, Lebedev, "Attainments and Problems of Soviet Archaeology," *World Archaeology* 13 (February 1982): 275.

## The Invitation to the Varangians

According to the *Primary Chronicle*, around 860 to 862 an invitation was sent from the Slavic tribes—the Chuds, the Slavs, the Krivichians, and the Ves—to the “Rus” (the Varangians) that said:

“Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us. They thus selected three brothers, with their kinfolk, who took with them all the Russes and migrated. The oldest, Rurik, located himself in Novgorod; the second, Sineus, at Beloozero; and the third, Truvor, in Izborsk. On account of these Varangians, the district of Novgorod became known as the land of Rus’. The present inhabitants of Novgorod are descended from the Varangian race, but aforetime they were Slavs.”<sup>11</sup>

In this passage, the editor is using the name "Rus, Russes, and Varangians" interchangeably. The origin and meaning of the word "Rus" is hotly debated and there are many interpretations, which I will discuss below. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term "Varangian" when referring to the Scandinavian Vikings that travelled and traded in the area that would become Kievan Rus and when referring to members of the Rurikid Dynasty.

## The Problem with the Invitation to the Varangians

In “The Invitation to the Varangians”, Omeljan Pritsak uncovers two major problems with the *Primary Chronicle*’s account of events: first, the invitation was

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<sup>11</sup> Cross and Wetzor, *Primary Chronicle*, 59-60.

extended by three towns not five tribes, and second, Novgorod was not one of these towns.<sup>12</sup> Pritsak determines that the invitation was extended by three towns and not five tribes by comparing the different versions of the *Primary Chronicle* in order to point out possible insertions or changes that the editor could have made based on the editors' understanding and knowledge available at the town. Secondly, Pritsak concludes that Novgorod was not one of the towns that extended the invitation and that Rurik did not rule there. Instead of Novgorod, the third city was actually Old Ladoga. The history of Novgorod is rich and it was considered a cultural center of early Kievan Rus; it would have been beneficial to the Kievan States' authority to have the editor of the *Primary Chronicle* name Novgorod as the place of the beginning of the Rurikid Dynasty. Furthermore, according to the archaeological evidence, Novgorod did not exist at the time of the invitation.

Between 1951-1962, archaeologists directed by Professor Artiskovsky and Dr. Kolchin, excavated a 170 meter by 130 meter rectangle in the Nerevskyk konet of Novgorod.<sup>13</sup> The first year of excavations unearthed 25 levels of wooden road and ten letters written on birch-bark text. These were an extremely important and surprising find because it is uncommon for wooden artifacts to be preserved so well or found at all. Novgorod is unique because the soil preserved a great amount of organic material from the Middle Ages. The dampness of the soil helps to preserve organic materials like wood, leather, and bone through waterlogging and creating an anaerobic environment.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Omeljan Pritsak, "The Invitation to The Varangians," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 1 (March 1977): 22.

<sup>13</sup> M.W. Thompson, *Novgorod the Great: Excavations at the Medieval City*, (London: Evelyn, Adams, and Mackay, 1967), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Clive Orton, "Medieval Novgorod: Epitome of Early Urban Life in Northern Europe," *Archaeology International*, (1998): 31-38.

Because Novgorod was built on such a wetland, streets had to be built and lined with wood for transportation or people could easily get stuck in the mud. The streets were built with mainly pine wood; long pole like sections were laid out longitudinally with wide width planks with notched ends were laid out on top of the poles to cover the width of the road.<sup>15</sup> The streets were repeatedly renewed by placing identical decking right on top of another. In all, archaeologists excavated 28 full levels of road and two partial layers.

Using dendrochronology (tree ring dating), archaeologists were able to relatively date each layer of road. Combined with the artifacts discovered in each layer archaeologists were even able to determine the exact year each surface was laid.<sup>16</sup> Dendrochronologists received 1,389 wooden specimens to their dates and were able to accurately date 1,038 of the samples.<sup>17</sup> The samples closer to the ground surface were harder to date because the wood did not preserve as well because of lack of water saturation. Using this dating technique archaeologists were able to give each piece of wood found during excavations an absolute date, since the logs retained their outermost ring.<sup>18</sup> The youngest street level excavated, level 1, was laid in 1462 A.D. The oldest street level excavated, level 28, was formed in 953 A.D. Although the youngest street level excavated was laid in 953 A.D., the area was certainly settled before the first road was laid. Archaeologists date Novgorod's founding to no earlier than the beginning of the tenth century.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Thompson, *Novgorod the Great*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Novgorod the Great*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *Novgorod the Great*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, *Novgorod the Great*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Pritsak, "Invitation," 16.

The dating of the archaeological evidence of Beloozero has been called into question as well. There are no dateable layers to the ninth century that have been excavated in Beloozero. It is possible that there were thin layers destroyed by later activity but there is no clear information at this time. For the purposes of this paper we will cautiously assume Beloozero existed until there is further concrete evidence to suggest otherwise.

## Norman Controversy

Most modern scholars have a hard time believing such a simple account as an invitation to an outside trading or raiding society's leader to the origin of a major state organization. The reluctance to believe the simple account of the *Primary Chronicle* has led to long-lasting argument between historians called the Norman Controversy; the argument is a heated debate because it questions the very origin of the word Rus, Russia, and Russian, and it influences commentary on both Russian and Ukrainian nationality.<sup>20</sup> The Normanists and Anti-Normanists challenge the influence and role that the Varangians played in the creation of Kievan Rus. The Normanists believe to varying degrees that the Varangians had a major influence in the creation of Kievan Rus as a state and that the origin of the word Rus is Finnish or Swedish. Scholars support this argument by citing the *Primary Chronicle's* "Invitation to the Varangians" and referencing Islamic and Byzantine writings that use the word "Rus" or "Rhos" to describe

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<sup>20</sup> Omeljan Pritsak, "The Origin of Rus," *The Russian Review* 36, no. 3 (July 1977): 251.

the Varangians in pre-Kievan Rus<sup>21</sup>. One of the major proponents of the Normanists theory in the late 18th century was German-born historian, Gerhard Müller.<sup>22</sup>

The Anti-Normanists disagree and insist that the Slavic tribes were organized and somewhat united already by the middle of the ninth century through a network of trade that eventually would include the Varangians. Anti-Normanists argue that the word “Rus” is closely related to the name of the River Ros and that the Varangians were a group of military-like traders that included many ethnicities other than Swedes.<sup>23</sup> The Anti-Normanists leader in the late 18th century was Russian scholar Mikhail Lomonosov.<sup>24</sup> Lomonosov argued his view by listing a number of Slavic names of rivers and towns that the Varangians allegedly inhabited to argue that the Varangians were actually Slavs. Secondly, he argued that had the Varangians spoken a Scandinavian tongue it would have left a mark on the developing Slavic language, but he claimed there were no Scandinavian borrowings in the Slavic language.<sup>25</sup> The Anti-Normanists are extremely patriotic towards Russia as a Slavic nation and resist acknowledging Norman influence. The official Soviet Union historiography adopted the Anti-Normanists position because the Normanists position was “theoretically harmful because it denied the ability of the Slavic nations to form an independent state by their own efforts.”<sup>26</sup>

There are other, less popular, theories on the origin of Rus. Omeljan Pritsak argues that the Norman Controversy debate has continued because: historians have let

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<sup>21</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 250.

<sup>22</sup> Michael A. Pesenson and Jennifer B. Spock, “Historical Writing in Russia and Ukraine,” in *The Oxford History of Writing*, ed. by Daniel Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 297.

<sup>23</sup> Roman Zakharii, “The Historiography of Normanist and Ant-Normanist theories on the Origin of Rus,” (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2002), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Pesenson and Spock, “Historical Writing”, 299.

<sup>25</sup> Pesenson and Spock, “Historical Writing”, 299.

<sup>26</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 250.



political or patriotic issues influence their conclusions; they have limited knowledge of world history (and thus do not take into consideration outside factors); they have used source material in a biased way.<sup>27</sup> History, Pritsak says, can produce accurate answers only when the full perspective of a problem is given.<sup>28</sup>

## When and Where the Varangians Showed up in Rus

The Norman Controversy has produced volumes of literature on the role of the Varangians in the formation of the first Russian or Rus state, but most of the literature neglects to answer why the Varangians came to Russia in the first place. Most archaeological evidence for the Varangians dated to the 8th and 9th centuries around Rus is found almost exclusively around Lake Ladoga.<sup>29</sup> There has been some evidence of Varangian presence found south of Lake Ladoga but it is so sparse they are considered 'single finds'. These single finds are most likely evidence of Varangians traveling through southern Rus but not actually settling. The earliest evidence of the Varangians settling, or at least spending considerable time is found at Staraja Ladoga around 850 CE. It is important to note that the archaeological evidence of Varangian presence in Staraja Ladoga is considerably different than the archaeological evidence found in territories of Western Europe that Vikings were known to raid; the material culture found in Staraja Ladoga is exactly the same as in Scandinavia and the number of items found here is incomparably higher than in the Viking territories in the West.<sup>30</sup> Staraja Ladoga was already an established Slavic town when the Varangians started

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<sup>27</sup> Pritsak, "Origin," 254.

<sup>28</sup> Pritsak, "Origin," 255.

<sup>29</sup> Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 115.

<sup>30</sup> Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 115.

showing up. The Varangians would have come from the Baltic Sea near the Gulf of Finland, through the River Neva and into Lake Ladoga before sailing south on the Volkhov River and finding Staraja Ladoga.

So why did the Varangians come to Rus in the first place? The *Primary Chronicle* does not specifically say why the Varangians first came to Rus. In the beginning of the *Primary Chronicle*, it mentions that there were waterways between Rome, Kiev, and Novgorod, and the Varangians that live across the “Varangian Sea” or Baltic Sea.<sup>31</sup> Before delving into the official invitation to the Varangians, the *Chronicle* mentions that the Varangians imposed tribute on the Chuds, Slavs, Merians, Ves’, and Severians.<sup>32</sup> The *Primary Chronicle* does not explain why the Varangians sailed across the Baltic Sea and began to collect tribute from the tribes living there.

The Varangians are known for sailing along Europe’s coastlines and raiding villages, towns and monasteries in well-established areas like France and England.<sup>33</sup> Well into the 9th century, Rus was sparsely populated, had few towns, was heavily forested, contained many bogs and marshes, and included many rivers with rapids.<sup>34</sup> It was not a hospitable environment and yet we can find in the archaeological record that the Varangians were in Rus, in Old Ladoga (the only town in all of northwestern Russia around the year 800), as early as 750 CE.<sup>35</sup> There is archaeological evidence to suggest that the Varangians sporadically travelled and had short-term settlements in Rus as early as 650 CE based on grave artifacts but the earliest archaeological

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<sup>31</sup> Cross and Wetzor, *Primary Chronicle*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Cross and Wetzor, *Primary Chronicle*, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Noonan, “Why the first Vikings came to Russia,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 34 (1986): 321.

<sup>34</sup> Noonan, “Vikings,” 322.

<sup>35</sup> Noonan, “Vikings,” 321.

evidence of the Varangians settling among the Rus is in Old Ladoga.<sup>36</sup> According to archaeologist Thomas Noonan, there had to be a particular reason for the Varangians to settle and travel beyond Old Ladoga considering the harsh environment. Noonan posits that it was the search for Islamic silver coins or dirhams that attracted the Varangians to Rus in the first place.<sup>37</sup> Archaeologists have found evidence of Islamic silver coins in Old Ladoga dating to around 800 CE. Silver was extremely valuable and it would make sense for the Varangians to travel further south into Rus to find their source.<sup>38</sup>

## Khazaria and Rus

Although Pritsak chooses to exclude archaeological evidence and does not provide a bibliography for the following theory on the origin of Rus, the archaeological record and Noonan's argument on the importance of Islamic silver coins has actually provided evidence that supports Pritsak's theory on the meaning of the word Rus and the formulation of the state known as Rus.

According to Pritsak, there are three historical events that led to a chain of reactions that are relevant to the emergence of Rus in the ninth century. First, the desertion of the Roman *limes* by the Roman legions in 400 A.D. provoked a migration of peoples that led to the Germanic Frankish realms in Scandinavia and Gaul.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, the rise of the Avar realm between 568-799 A.D. The Avars used the Slavs as specially

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<sup>36</sup> Birger Nerman, "Swedish Viking Colonies on the Baltic," *Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua* 9 (1934): 171-172.

<sup>37</sup> Noonan, "Vikings," 340.

<sup>38</sup> Noonan, "Vikings," 341.

<sup>39</sup> Pritsak, "Origin," 256.

trained slaves to be recruited for command posts and warriors.<sup>40</sup> Lastly, the intrusion of the Arabs into the Mediterranean Sea around 650 A.D. and the subsequent increase of the slave trade. According to an Arabic author, Ibn Khurdādhbeh, there were only two trading companies in Eurasia participating in the Eurasian slave trade: the Jewish Rādhāniya (from Gaul) and the non-Jewish Rus (from Scandinavia).<sup>41</sup>

The Jewish Rādhāniya could secure safe passage through the Mediterranean Sea and travelled between Constantinople and the capital of the Turkic Khazars. As a result of the cooperation between the Rādhāniya and the Khazars, the military and economic leaders of the Khazar state converted to Judaism. This caused internal conflict between the ceremonial head of state, the *khagan* (king or chieftain), and those that converted because the *khagan* felt duty-bound to maintain the Old Turkic religion.<sup>42</sup>

In the meantime, according to Pritsak, the non-Jewish Rus circumvented the Mediterranean basin by way of the Baltic Sea, Volga River, and Dnieper River. The non-Jewish Rus company would become one of the many Varangian groups in Eastern Europe. They helped to establish two important trade towns, Polotsk and Smolensk, which were colonized by Baltic Wends.<sup>43</sup> This encouraged other towns, like Ladoga, Beloozero and Izborsk to send the official “Invitation to the Varangians” around 852, as described in the *Primary Chronicle*.<sup>44</sup>

The two trading companies were not active simultaneously in Pritsak’s understanding of their histories; the non-Jewish Rus actually replaced the Jewish

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<sup>40</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 260.

<sup>41</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 263.

<sup>42</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 264.

<sup>43</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 266.

<sup>44</sup> Cross and Wetzor, *Primary Chronicle*, 59-60.

Rādhāniya between 830-840.<sup>45</sup> When the non-Jewish Rus replaced the Jewish Rādhāniya, they established trade with Khazars, and developed very close ties with the Khazar *khaganate* and were strongly influenced by their institutions.<sup>46</sup> Historians and archaeologists are unable to determine the exact date for which the Varangians or non-Jewish Rus began to penetrate into the interior of Kievan Rus but there is conclusive written evidence in the *Annales Bertiniani* to show that the Varangians had arrived in Constantinople from the Black Sea in 839.<sup>47</sup> As previously stated, the earliest evidence of the Varangians in Old Ladoga dates to around 750 and dirhams first appeared around the year 800.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it only took the Varangians one generation from the time that the first dirhams appeared in Old Ladoga to find a route to Constantinople through the interior of Rus. If the Jewish Rādhāniya and the non-Jewish Rus were participating in the Eurasian slave trade, it would make sense for them to be paid in silver dirhams and then subsequently use those dirhams to purchase goods and services while traveling through Eastern Europe.

So by 800-860, Eastern Europe had been split into two spheres of interest. The Avars, Bulgars, and Khazars to the south, and multiple Varangian clans to the north. Pritsak claims that it is futile to try to establish a nationality for the Varangian's because they did not have just one. They were first and foremost a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, group of professionals willing to work for anyone who could pay them.<sup>49</sup> Although the *Primary Chronicle* indicates that the invitation to the Varangians established the Rurikid

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<sup>45</sup> Pritsak, "Origin," 268.

<sup>46</sup> Noonan, "Khazaria, Kiev, and Constantinople in the First Half of the Tenth Century," in *Thresholds in the Orthodox Commonwealth* ed. Lucien Frary (Bloomington: Slavica, 2017): 369.

<sup>47</sup> Noonan, "Vikings," 345.

<sup>48</sup> Noonan, "Vikings," 341.

<sup>49</sup> Pritsak, "Origin," 261.

dynasty, Pritsak says that the developing society in the north had not yet reached higher culture because it did not have a place for one nationality, nor one literary or sacred language.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, they developed a low level, professional society that was not bound to either a specific territory or religion.

Pritsak concludes his theory, by arguing that Yaroslav the Wise is the proper founder of the Rus dynasty because it was under his reign that the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, non-territorial community was transformed into a new “high” culture based on a foreign, written, and sanctified Slavic language.<sup>51</sup> Pritsak chooses to exclude archaeological evidence from his theory because he believes that the origin of Rus is foremost a historical question and therefore should be answered by historical sources.<sup>52</sup> However, Noonan has proved that archaeology can provide concrete evidence supportive of Pritsak’s theory.

## Kiev and Khazaria

According to the *Primary Chronicle*, Rurik granted Askold and Dir permission to go to Constantinople around 862. On their way there, when they came to Kiev and inquired whose town it was, they were informed that three brothers, Kiy, Shcheck, and Khoriv had built the city but that their descendants were tributaries of the Khazars after the brothers’ deaths.<sup>53</sup> Askold and Dir decided to stay in Kiev and establish their dominion over the Polyanians living in the area. Then in 863-866, Askold and Dir attacked Constantinople but a storm destroyed their fleet.<sup>54</sup> There are two major

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<sup>50</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 267.

<sup>51</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 271.

<sup>52</sup> Pritsak, “Origin,” 254.

<sup>53</sup> Cross and Wetzor, *Primary Chronicle*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Cross and Wetzor, *Primary Chronicle*, 60.

problems with this account of events. First, it omits any mention of Khazar involvement or retaliation. We are supposed to believe that two Varangians from Novgorod established their undisputable control over a city while its Khazar overlords did nothing.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, there have been extensive archaeological excavations in Kiev that date the city to the late ninth century.<sup>56</sup> At most, the three brothers who built the city had not been dead very long. At the least, Askold and Dir were inventions of the late chroniclers who sought to legitimize the establishment of Kiev by claiming the Rus capitol was controlled by Oleg around 880.<sup>57</sup>

### Archaeology of Kiev

The archaeological evidence suggests that Kiev's population at the time of Oleg's arrival was only between 100-200 people.<sup>58</sup> There is evidence of a complex social structure in Kiev during the late ninth to early tenth century that produced a social stratification notable in graves and architecture. The excavations of the necropolis illustrate a notable Khazarian influence or presence based on the amount of Khazar material culture found. Archaeologists have also found evidence of Khazar influence in chamber graves in Kiev and Chernigov. In the chamber graves, the persons horse was buried with them, not at the feet (like Scandinavian tradition) but at the side of the host (nomadic Khazar tradition).<sup>59</sup> By the tenth century, the population of Kiev had grown into

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<sup>55</sup> Noonan, "Khazars," 372.

<sup>56</sup> Vladimir Petrukhin, "The Normans and the Khazars in the South of Rus (The Formation of the "Russian Land" in the Middle Dnepr Area)," *Russian History* 19 (1992): 396.

<sup>57</sup> Noonan, "Khazars," 372.

<sup>58</sup> Johan Callmer, "The Archaeology of Kiev to the End of the Earliest Phase," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 11 (Dec 1987): 338.

<sup>59</sup> Vladimir Petrukhin, "The Normans and the Khazars in teh South of Rus' (The Formation of the "Russian Land" in the Middle Dnepr Area)," *Russian History* 19 (1992): 397.

the thousands.<sup>60</sup> There is archaeological evidence for the existence of at least five social groups by the tenth century: princes and their families made the ruling group, the prince's high-ranking followers, merchants and retainers, low ranking and household people, and servants or slaves.<sup>61</sup>

Most of the buildings in Kiev were constructed of wooden planks and straw until the middle of the tenth century, when stone architecture first appeared in Kiev.<sup>62</sup> Archaeologists uncovered fragments of two of the earliest stone buildings inside of rampart and moat. Since only fragments of the building were recovered reconstruction is not feasible. However, the building was constructed of materials transported a considerable distance, including granite, sandstone, marble, and rosy slate. They also found, fragments of brick, polychrome tiles, and evidence of frescos and mosaics on the walls.<sup>63</sup>



Fig. 1 A suggested reconstruction of the center of Kiev in the late tenth century after the completion of the Tithes Church.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Callmer, "Archaeology of Kiev," 338.

<sup>61</sup> Callmer, "Archaeology of Kiev," 346.

<sup>62</sup> Callmer "Archaeology of Kiev," 335.

<sup>63</sup> Callmer, "Archaeology of Kiev," 335.

<sup>64</sup> Callmer, "Archaeology of Kiev," 363.



## Boats and Boat Graves

Excavations of boats and boat graves has provided new information on Varangian and Slavic travel on the hazardous rivers in Rus and the kind of boats they were using. Archaeologists have known about boat graves in Rus for more than a century but because the data for a long time had not been adequately analyzed or published in an accessible way these graves are often left out of Russian and Western discussions of the Varangians in Russia.<sup>65</sup>

A boat grave is defined as a grave in which the deceased was buried in a boat or ship; in all cases the boat was originally built for actual use. The tradition of burying the dead with boats or burning the dead in boats is a Viking-Age, Scandinavian phenomenon since evidence of this practice has been found in all three Scandinavian countries since the first century AD.<sup>66</sup> It is often hard to identify a boat grave because wood deteriorates quickly in most soils. Thus, boat graves are usually identified by the iron rivets that once held the boat together. If a grave had not been previously disturbed and the iron rivets are *in situ* the archaeologists can map the outline of the boat. Within an anaerobic and waterlogged environment, it is possible for wood to be preserved. In these favorable conditions it is possible to identify boat graves from which the boat did not have iron rivets, like if it was a small dugout or skin boat. As wood deteriorates it can leave an almost unnoticeable stain on the surrounding soil. To a trained eye, archeologists can identify the basic shape of the boat that was once buried there by watching carefully for stained soil.

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<sup>65</sup> Anne Stalsberg, "Scandinavian Viking-Age Boat Graves in Old Rus," *Russian History* 28 (2001): 362.

<sup>66</sup> Stalsberg, "Boat Graves," 362.

The excavated boat graves are important because they provide evidence of the Varangian's influence in Rus, how the Varangians traveled through Rus, and implications for the relationship between the Varangians and local people. The Varangians could not have sailed down the shallow Rus' tributaries, through rapids, and over miles of portages with the seafaring boats. The seafaring Varangian ships would have been too large and too slow to manage the rapids and shallow tributaries. The Varangians would have had to either build new boats upon arrival or buy them from the locals who already sailed these rivers; the archaeological evidence suggests the latter.

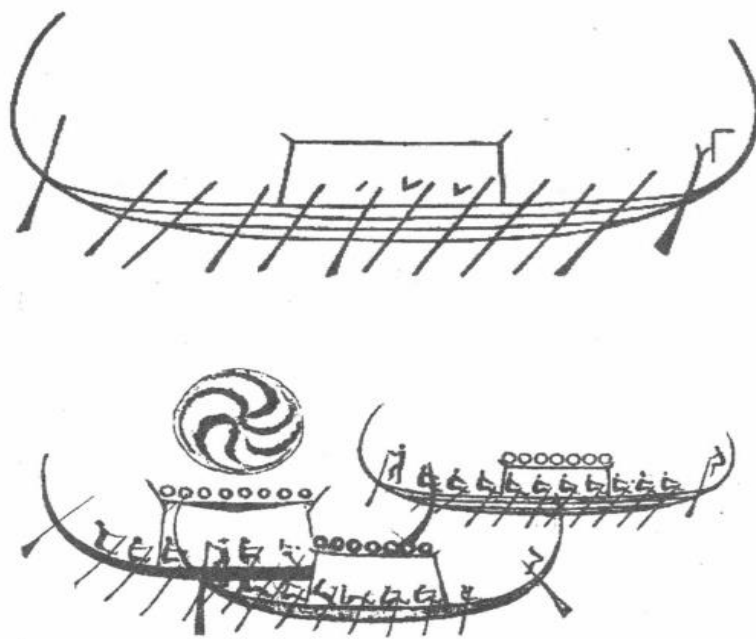


Fig. 2 Illustration representing the type of shallow, long, dug-out type of boats that could traverse the Rus tributaries.<sup>67</sup>

From the boat graves, archaeologists were able to determine by the ends of the rivets that most if not all of the boat graves excavated were either built in Rus or built by

<sup>67</sup> Stalsberg, "Boat Graves," 359.

the Slavs. Viking-age ships were built with round end shanks, while Slav or Balt ships were built with square-end shanks. All boat graves excavated and studied so far have been with square-end shanks.<sup>68</sup> We cannot conclude with full confidence that all of the boats were Slav or Balt in origin because there is archaeological evidence that has not been adequately analyzed but the evidence currently available certainly points to the boats being Slavic or Baltic in origin.

Stalsberg references literary primary sources such as the famous traveler Ibn Fadlan and Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus of Byzantium in addition to the archaeological evidence of the boat graves to build her argument. Constantine's account of the Varnagians buying new boats is very important because there is no evidence—archaeological, literary, or otherwise—that the Varnagians sailed their own seafaring boats along the Eastern European rivers; Constantine's account supports the conclusion that the Varangians did not sail their own boats in Rus, which therefore supports the argument that the boat graves are indeed Scandinavian burials inside of Baltic boats because those are the boats the Varangians were using in Rus. Again, the *Primary Chronicle* does not explain the logistics of travelling by boat in Rus or the importance of boat burials. This is new information provided through archaeology.

### Archaeology of Novgorod

A major find in Novgorod were the birch-bark texts which, in addition to letters to landlords or agricultural references, were particularly useful for gathering new information on financial dealings and disputes, topic that are largely absent from the chronicle narratives although there is some mention of them in the early law codes. The

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<sup>68</sup> Stalsberg, "Boats", 370.

documents on credit disputes can give historians an inside look into how financial disputes were resolved between peasants and how the laws were enforced. Below is an example of one of the birch-bark texts found in Novgorod during the excavations, dated to have been written in the late thirteenth century.<sup>69</sup>

From Anna greetings to Klimiata. Sir brother, make a stand on my behalf against Kosniatin [*or*: assist me in my lawsuit with Kosniatin]. Now, make an announcement through people [*or*: before people] against his wrongdoing:

Fig. 3 Translated birch-bark text. No. 531.<sup>70</sup>

“Since you accused my sister and her daughter of being guarantor, called my sister a slut [*less likely*, a cow] and her daughter a whore, Fedor, on his arrival, heard of the accusation, chased my sister away and wanted to kill her.” And now, sir brother, having counseled with Voeslav, tell him [Kosniatin]: “Since you brought up this accusation, then prove it.” If Kosniatin says: “She became the guarantor for her brother-in-law,” then you, sir brother, tell him this: “If there will be witnesses [who testify] against my sister, if there will be witnesses, before whom she [i.e., I] became the guarantor for her brother-in-law, then the guilt is on her [i.e., on me].” When you, brother, find out in what words and [the kind] of a guarantor [arrangements] he [Kosniatin] accuses me of, then, if there are witnesses who confirm this – then may I not be your sister and a wife to my husband. You may even kill me, without looking at Fedor [i.e., not caring for his opinion]. My daughter gave money through people [*or*: before people] with a public announcement and demanded collateral. And he (Kosniatin) called me to come to the *pogost*<sup>22</sup> and I came, since he left saying: “I send 4 court officials [*dvorians*] [to collect from each of the accused?] a *grivna* of silver.”

Birch-bark text No. 531 was written in Novgorod during the 12th or 13th century in Kievan Rus. At the time, the *Pravda Russkaia* was the main Kievan Rus law code

<sup>69</sup> Th. S. Noonan and R. K. Kovalev, “What can Archaeology tell us about how Debts Were Documented and Collected in Kievan Rus,” *Russian History* 27 (2000): 125.

<sup>70</sup> Noonan and Kovalev, “Debts,” 125.

that outlined commercial law.<sup>71</sup> The recovery of these birch-bark documents by archaeologists can now give historians a new perspective on judicial and other interactions in medieval Novgorod other than the Law Code.

Birch-bark letter No. 531 tells us that Anna, her daughter, and Fedor were free peasants living on Kosniatin's land and that they can possibly read and write. Anna and her daughter were lending out money to other peasants on behalf of Kosniatin. Anna and her daughter became guarantors for the other peasants, meaning that if they did not pay their debt to Kosniatin, Anna and her daughter were responsible for the debt; Kosniatin is accusing Anna of owing him money because she was the guarantor for her brother-in-law's debt.<sup>72</sup> This shows that the existence of legally binding commercial contracts for witnesses of lending, that lending and credit was available to non-elite townspeople, and that women were allowed to be moneylending agents for their landlords.

The *Pravda Russkaia* states, "If anyone sues another for money [loaned] and the latter denies the charges, he has to produce witnesses who must take an oath, and [if they do so], he receives his money back; if the loan has been overdue for many years, [the debtor] has to pay 3 grivna for the offense." The *Pravda* does not specify the role or duties of a guarantor: it only instructs that the lender should have a witness present when lending money so that he or she can testify in court regarding his claim.

Most of the birch-bark texts discovered were personal in nature and allow the reader to better understand the mundane activities of life in Novgorod for the townsmen

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<sup>71</sup> Noonan and Kovalev, "Debts," 121.

<sup>72</sup> Translated birch-bark text No. 531, Novgorod, found in, Th. S. Noonan and R. K. Kovalev, "What can Archaeology tell us about how Debts Were Documented and Collected in Kievan Rus" *Russian History*, 27, no. 2 (2000), 121.

and women. Some texts found are simply lists, requests, or confirm actions already taken. Below are a few birch-bark texts that illustrate the simplicity and casual nature of most of the texts recovered.

No. 384: "From Stoeneg to Mother. I have given Savva five kunas and a towel, two spoons, two knives, and a deerskin".<sup>73</sup>

No. 502: "From Miroslav to Olisei Grechin. Gavko from Polotsk comes here. Ask him where he is staying. Probably you saw what happened when I seized Ivan, and placed him before witnesses. Tell me how he answers."<sup>74</sup>

No. 49: "Greetings from Nastasia to my Lord, my brother. My Boris is not alive anymore."<sup>75</sup>

No. 377: "From Mikita to Ulianicia. Marry me. I want you and you want me. Send Ignat as witness."<sup>76</sup>

The overall personal nature of the majority of the birch-bark texts begs the question of who read and wrote the texts. In the case of birch-bark text No. 531, it seems that the writer is Anna and that her brother Klimiata is the recipient. Since Klimiata is the recipient, it can be assumed that he can read since it is addressed to him

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<sup>73</sup> Daniel Kaiser and Gary Marker, *Reinterpreting Russian History: Readings, 860-1860s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

<sup>74</sup> Kaiser and Marker, *Reinterpreting*, 72.

<sup>75</sup> Jean Blankoff, "Love, Death, and Taxes in medieval Novgorod," *Archaeology* 53, no. 6 (2000): 32.

<sup>76</sup> Blankoff, "Love, Death and Taxes," 32.

The problem with this assumption is that we cannot discern whether or not Anna truly wrote this herself or if a scribe or messenger wrote her oral words for her.

Many archaeologists want to believe that the birch-bark texts suggest a higher literacy rate among medieval Novgorodian peasants than previously thought because most of the birch-bark texts can be connected to the non-elite classes. Historians can conclude that Russian peasants, or at least townsmen and women, were definitely taking the time to produce written invitations, inventories, and contracts during the Middle Ages.

Slavonic studies professor Dr. Simon Franklin argues that the majority of birch-bark documents from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were written by their senders and more than likely read by the recipients due to their relative informality, their general brevity, and the causality of the way they were treated (thrown away into the mud).<sup>77</sup> The evidence of such informality does not support the idea of a scribe writing down or reading out loud as it is written. The style of writing suggests a close relationship between the senders and recipients. Franklin concludes that there is a general impression of widespread lay literacy among the townspeople of Novgorod that suggests that literacy is more common in Novgorod than previously thought.<sup>78</sup> Franklin is careful to explain that this does not mean that Novgorod is unique in its seemingly widespread literacy, but that the environmental conditions that allowed these birch-bark texts to be preserved and discovered intact in Novgorod allows historians to make the conclusion that literacy is more common in Novgorod than previously thought.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Simon Franklin, "Literacy in Kievan Rus", in *Reinterpreting Russian History: Readings, 860-1860s*, Daniel Kaiser and Gary Marker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 76.

<sup>78</sup> Franklin, "Literacy," 77.

<sup>79</sup> Franklin, "Literacy," 76.

'Greetings from Gavrila Postnja to my brother-in-law Grigorij, [my] *kum*, and to my sister Ulita. May you come to the city, to my happiness, and not depart from our request. May God give you happiness. We will all not depart from your request.'<sup>1</sup>

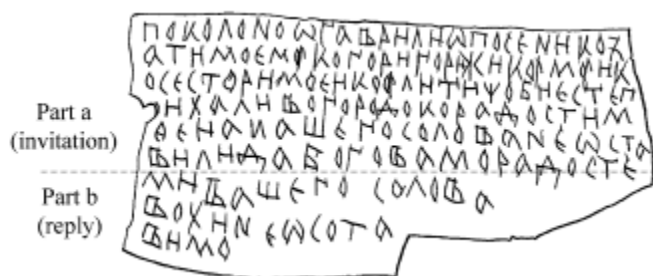


Fig. 4 Translated Birch-bark no. 497.<sup>80</sup>

Russian linguist Jos Schaeken argues that in the case of birch-bark text No. 497 the text is not only a single message, but rather an invitation and a reply written on the same piece of bark. The first translation written suggests that it is one message from Gavrila to his brother-in-law Grigorij. Schaeken argues that by according to the original birch-bark text, the first section is from Gavrila, and the second section is a reply from Grigorij.<sup>81</sup> By looking at the letter inscriptions Schaeken also concludes that the same person wrote the invitation and the reply. Coupled with the fact that the text was found inside of Novgorod instead of outside, where one would expect since Gavrila is asking Grigorij to come into the city, Schaeken concludes that a scribe or messenger wrote and delivered this message to the recipient, wrote a reply back and delivered the same birch bark to Gavrila.<sup>82</sup> Birch-bark text No. 497 is unique among the other birch-bark texts because it is the only one with a clear reply on the same piece of bark. While Schaeken's argument that there was a messenger-scribe involved in this birch-bark text

<sup>80</sup> Schaeken, J. "Don't Shoot the Messenger. A Pragmaphilological Approach to Birchbark Letter no. 497 from Novgorod," *Russian Linguistics*, 35, no.1, 1-11.

<sup>81</sup> Schaeken, "Don't Shoot the Messenger," 7.

<sup>82</sup> Schaeken, "Don't Shoot the Messenger," 7.



can be supported, it does not support that all of the birch-bark texts found were created in this way.

Overall, the excavations at Novgorod between 1951 and 1962 unearthed materials and artifacts that historians can learn from that cannot be found in the *Novgorod Chronicle*. The road system and urban development that was uncovered allows historians to accurately understand the living conditions of medieval Novgorod through material remains and dating techniques. Ultimately the hundreds of birch-bark texts discovered at Novgorod offer far deeper insight into medieval Novgorod than archaeologists anticipated before the excavations. The birch-bark texts are important because they illustrate the everyday life of the Middle Ages that the *Novgorod Chronicles* do not, but they also indicate a generally higher literacy rate than was formerly thought. The excavations at Novgorod in the 1950s and early 1960s influenced further excavations in other Russian cities in hopes of finding comparable information about medieval life in Russia.

## Conclusion

As I have illustrated, in a time and region for which written sources are scarce, archaeological data should not be underestimated. The material record and the interpretations of archaeologists has illuminated answers to questions that historians have been asking for years. Furthermore, and most importantly, the archaeological record has provided invaluable data on the history of Kievan Rus that would not have been known solely based on the *Primary Chronicle* and other primary sources.



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