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## The Question of Principalities in Kyivan Rus'

The present article is the result and, to a certain extent, an example of the challenges posed by the use of digital humanities in the field of medieval studies. Digital humanities, as a new methodology, if properly used, should contribute to the fruitful opening of new avenues for research. Otherwise, it is just solipsistic entertainment.

In the autumn of 2021, as a Research Fellow at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute I started a MAPA module project in collaboration with Kostyantyn Bondarenko focused on the cultural and artistic patrimony of Kyivan Rus' (<https://gis.huri.harvard.edu/golden-age-kyivan-rus>). The idea behind it, apart from my own research interests, was that, in view of the rhetoric that preceded the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and that had been in the agenda of the Russian presidency for years, it was imperative to decolonise the history of Kyivan Rus' and to vindicate, independently from any teleological imperial rhetoric, the cultural achievements of a medieval state that had ceased to exist centuries ago and whose heirs, if any, should be more than one modern nation. 'When' and 'how', or 'if at all' Kyivan Rus' ceased to exist is not the focus of the present article. Many theories are available on the subject, and anybody can dig out the 'facts' to back up their ideas. There was, however, a need to set up a chronological and geographical framework for the project, which, since it involved GIS software, had to be particularly precise.

I borrowed the title from Simon Franklin's description of Iaroslav's time in his *Sermons and Rhetoric of Kievan Rus'* (1991)<sup>1</sup> and enlarged its chronological limits from the official date of Christianisation (988) to the fall of Kyiv to the Mongols in 1240. The dates are random, and contestable, and certainly do not imply any particular stance about subsequent historical events. It is expected that, in the future, the time frame will eventually be expanded, but at the moment it would

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1 "For posterity Ilarion's writing epitomizes the "Golden Age" of Kievan culture in the mid-eleventh century, the reign of Jaroslav the Wise, when all the land of Rus' was — in the view of the contemporary elite and their medieval successors — united in peace and stability", Simon Franklin, *Sermons and Rhetoric of Kievan Rus'* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), xvi. The concept was subsequently developed in Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The emergence of Rus, 750–1200* (London, 1996), 208–244.

render the project undoable. The project uses GIS software to geocode three sets of evidence: churches, monasteries and manuscripts.

It was this need to use geographic coordinates that made me question the possibility, and indeed the need, for describing principalities with purported delineated borders as they are often represented in maps of Kyivan Rus'.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, it has been understood that the medieval state of Kyivan Rus' consisted of an increasing number of principalities whose representatives fought incessantly against each other until (almost) all of them fell to the Mongol invasion. This was the traditional narrative. The supposed 'crisis' (Fennell), 'destruction' (Pritsak), 'disintegration' (Rybakov) or 'shattering' (Vernadsky) have been rightly contested in recent times as much as the myth of the Mongol Yoke, but even among those keen on seeing the thirteenth-century events through a less dialectical lens, the term 'principality' seems to have been a comfortable one. And indeed it might be logical: if the ruler is a prince (*kniaz*'), then the territory over which he rules is a principality. However, in a recent work Ostrowski and Raffensperger have proposed that the term *kniaz*' should be translated as king, since at that time there was no superior authority in Rus', and only later the terms *Velikii Kniaz*' (Grand Prince), or Tsar would be adopted by rulers of more than one of these territories.<sup>3</sup> Whether there can actually exist princes without kings is really secondary, and yet another example of a nominalist discussion that reflects more the categories in the minds of modern historians than probably any ontological concern of their bearers at the time.

The problem really arrives when one wants to provide content to the term. Or, to put it in other words, when we speak about the principality of Chernihiv, or Suzdal or "any of the *approximately dozen* principalities"<sup>4</sup> in the pre-Mongol period, what are the differences between them in order to actually distinguish one from another and draw borders between them? What would those borders really imply? A change of legislation, of currency, of foreign policy? How can we arrive to an "approximate" amount of states, or "appanages, or vassal states, or city-states, or principalities, or kingdoms"<sup>5</sup>? One of the main problems, of course, is that they did not really exist as such. Or, rather, they did exist, but maybe not in the modern sense we try to attribute to the terminology, whichever term we prefer

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2 However, this is not always the case. The maps in Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The emergence of Rus*, 404–405, focus on settlements, rather than borders, while the maps by Gonneau and Lavrov (Pierre Gonneau, Aleksandr Lavrov, *Des Rhôs à la Russie: histoire de l'Europe orientale (v. 730–1689)* (Paris, 2012), 623–624, provides only one large "frontière approximative" of the whole Rus' for the time under discussion.

3 Christian Raffensperger devoted a whole monograph to discussing the issue, and all the possible translations and parallels of the term in Western sources, in *The Kingdom of Rus'* (Kalamazoo, 2017). More recently, Donald Ostrowski, Christian Raffensperger, *The ruling families of Rus: clan, family and kingdom* (London, 2023), 39–50.

4 Janet Martin, *Medieval Russia: 980–1584* (Cambridge, 2007), 91 (emphasis mine).

5 Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The emergence of Rus*, 370.

to use. There seems to be no trace of the term 'principality' as a formal structure of governance anywhere. There are plenty of examples of territories understood to be or belong to the 'land of,' usually followed by the name of one of the capital or main cities mentioned in scholarly literature, but even this situation is far from stable. Between 980 and 1240 the borders of all of them shifted about forty times, counting the expansions, land divisions after the death of princes and reunifications after internal conflicts. The Chernihiv of 1054 included the cities of Staria Riazan' and Murom, and the Pereiaslavl' of the same year included the city of Rostov, parts of what would become the land of Rostov-Suzdal — or Suzdalia according to other authors — including the place where the future Vladimir-Zalesskii will be eventually established. But under Iurii Dolgorukii (1125–1157), Rostov-Suzdal, now independent, stretched from the Volga to the Oka and excluded Pereiaslavl'; and the cities of Murom and Staria Riazan', that belonged to Chernihiv in 1054, were subsequently attached in one form or another to Vladimir-Suzdal. So, when we speak about the principality or the city of Chernihiv, or the city of Vladimir-Zalesskii, or the land or principality of Vladimir-Suzdal, or Rostov-Suzdal, the first questions would have to be: which and when Chernihiv? which and when Suzdal? In order to understand the relevance of each of examples, we can use textual sources, when we have them, and archaeological evidence, if available. Historiography provides long lists of names of places founded or visited by the rulers of Rus' and also names of the cities that each son of each ruling prince received as inheritance upon their death. The little evidence that can be discerned in legal codes is also relevant for my argument, and birch-bark letters provide a list of places of origin or destination of everyday communication and some useful insights as well. Finally, evidence of religious buildings, whether they are churches or monasteries, and how big they were, also gives us a better understanding of the relevance of each place during the timeframe under study.

Secondary bibliography agrees on the importance of the following cities in the period under study: Kyiv, Novgorod, Polatsk, Chernihiv, Smolensk, Volodymyr (in Volhynia), Pereiaslav, Halych, Staria Riazan, Vladimir-Zalesskii and Hrodna.<sup>6</sup> The last one, and all its dependent towns and settlements, will be integrated in the land of Polatsk by the thirteenth century. Some of them became more important than others for posterity, and even more important cities emerged after the mid-thirteenth century that were only villages at the time described in the project. All the eleven cities above are first mentioned in the oldest manuscript of the *Pověst' vremennykh lét* (PVL), the *Laurentian*, dated to 1377, alongside many other places. Moreover, Kyiv, Novgorod, Smolensk and Chernihiv are also mentioned in

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6 Mikhail Tikhomirov, *Drevnerusskie goroda* (Moscow, 1956); Andrei Kuza, *Malye goroda Drevnei Rusi* (Moscow, 1989) and *Drevnerusskie gorodishcha X–XIII vv.: svod arkheologicheskikh pamiatnikov* (Moscow, 1996). These are the cities that Tikhomirov called 'capital cities'. This hierarchy has been replicated in our map.

Konstantinos Porphyrogenetos' *De Administrando Imperio* (DAI), and Hrodna and Halych are also mentioned in the *Hypatian* manuscript of the PVL. Since the project uses the date of first mention in Rus' historiographic sources as the date of foundation of places, however imperfect and arguable this principle could be (and it certainly is), there are bound to be discrepancies between the dates in the map and those where indirect or secondary evidence makes us suspect prior establishment. For example, the first mention of Vladimir-Zalesskii, in the *Laurentian*, is under the year 1108. It is possible, however, that the city was already active in the 990s, or so some specialists think according to secondary evidence, but we felt we had to fix a criterion and stick to it in order to avoid confusion. Thus, and beyond any other possible data, the above mentioned cities are given the following foundation dates: Kyiv (880), Novgorod (859), Polatsk (862), Chernihiv (907), Smolensk (882), Volodymyr (in Volhynia) (988), Pereiaslav (907), Halych (1138), Staraia Riazan (1096), Vladimir-Zalesskii (1108) and Hrodna (1127). The criterion for the above-mentioned hierarchy is poorly explained in the very works of those who established it, and it is certainly under discussion, but we have kept it, for the moment, as it is. Other places that would certainly become relevant, Rostov (862) or Suzdal (1024) were equally mentioned in the *Laurentian* copy of the PVL. Furthermore, the DAI did mention other places, such as Liubech, Vytychiv or Vyshhorod, which did not become historically so significant.

Beyond this list of cities organised hierarchically in which we have differentiated three categories (capital cities (11), most relevant cities (11) and cities with dependant villages (38)), ninety other toponyms have been recorded. All of them can be found organised in various layers according to their date of foundation, their size and the territory to which they belonged to, their 'land.' The number of lands also varies over time. In the ninth century there are only seven: Kyiv, Novgorod, Chernihiv, Polatsk, Riazan, Rostov-Suzdal and Smolensk. Pereiaslav, Halych and Volhynia are first mentioned as lands in the tenth century. In total, ten different territories with all their cities, towns and villages. I observed that the places themselves do not change from land to land, that is, a city does not belong to one land at one point and starts belonging to another land later. In this sense, the territories are stable.<sup>7</sup> What changes over time is who rules over them.

The evidence provided by historiography mentions either cities where princes start to rule or places where they go in any given mission. Under the year 6496 (988), after the Christianisation of Volodymyr, the PVL lists all the names of his twelve sons and where each of them will be ruling (cols. 121,5–16):<sup>8</sup>

7 In our map, the ten lands are colour-coded and the chronological evolution of new places provided by quarter-century with different symbols.

8 The text provided is Donald Ostrowski's *paradosis* in his edition of the text in D. Ostrowski, D. J. Birnbaum, H. G. Lunt, and Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, *The Pověst' vremennykh lét: an interlinear collation and paradosis* (Distributed by Harvard University Press for the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute: [Cambridge, Mass.], 2003).

Володимиръ просвѣщенъ самъ и сынове его и земля его. Бѣ бо у него сыновъ 12: Вышеславъ, Изяславъ, Святопѣлкъ, Ярославъ, Всеволодъ, Святославъ, Мьстиславъ, Борисъ, Глѣбъ, Станиславъ, Позвиздъ, Судиславъ. И посади Вышеслава въ Новѣгородѣ, а Изяслава въ Полотъскѣ, а Святопѣлка въ Туровѣ, а Ярослава въ Ростовѣ. Умьрьшю же старѣишему Вышеславу въ Новѣгородѣ, посади Ярослава въ Новѣгородѣ, а Бориса въ Ростовѣ, а Глѣба въ Муромѣ, Святослава въ Деревѣхъ, Всеволода въ Володимирѣ, Мьстислава Тмуторокани.<sup>9</sup>

This distribution of the realm among his sons, and the reshuffling Volodymyr makes after the death of the eldest, is deeply related to the, sometimes, elusive concept of the *otchina*, or *votchina*. In his most recent monograph, Donald Ostrowski devotes almost a whole chapter to discussing what the term meant in early modern Russia.<sup>10</sup> His aim is to discern in which aspects it differed from *pomest'e* as a form of identifying land-holding privileges. At face value, it could be said that *otchina* relates to the inheritance received directly from one's father (as exemplified in the PVL entry), which could or could not include land-owning rights, whereas *pomest'e* refers directly to a piece of land, a place or places, granted to someone in recognition of services granted to the ruler, which might or might not be subsequently bequeathed to one's heirs. Sreznevskii understood the term *votchina* and *otchina* as translating either 'patria' or 'patrimonium.'<sup>11</sup>

Distinctions are more easily traced down as time advances and legal texts become more abundant, and terminology more specialised. In this sense, the *otchina* would be the possession of the *kniaz'*, whatever translation we want to give to it (prince, king or duke). In historiography we find the first examples of the use of the term *kniaz'* and *velikii kniaz'* in the PVL from quite early on, as well as related terms, such as *kniazhiti* ("to rule") *sub anno* 6453 (945) or *kniazhen'ia* (*Sviatoslavlia*) ("ruling") *sub anno* 6454 (946). Notwithstanding the fact that the text took form much later than the events, the use of the term *kniaz'*, or any of its many related forms, says little about what the office itself entitled.<sup>12</sup> I think choosing 'king' as a translation arguing that there was nobody else above it is misguided and reductionist. Everybody knows that the Dukes of Aquitaine had more land and more resources than the kings of France in the mid-twelfth century, and the question should not be *our* translation of their term, but *their* understanding

9 Curiously, the entry corresponding to the following year starts with Volodymyr's determination to establish more cities.

10 Donald Ostrowski, *Russia in the Early Modern World. The Continuity of Change* (London, 2022), 101–152.

11 Izmail Sreznevskii, *Materialy dlia slovaria drevne-russkogo iazyka po pis'mennym pamiatnikam* (St. Petersburg, 1893), вотчина (307–308) and отчина (830–832).

12 In a completely different context, but maybe interesting in order to caution us against seeing too much into terminology, the oldest version of the apocryphal text of the *Acta Pilati*, probably dated to the thirteenth century, states that both Tiberius and Herod were *tsars* (translated from the Greek βασιλεύς), when we would clearly distinguish between Emperor Tiberius and King Herod.

of what it entitled.<sup>13</sup> More relevant to the discussion, perhaps, is the fact that the term does not seem to differentiate between succession and inheritance, and that is probably where the problem starts: one can succeed to an office, but one inherits property. And one can do the first without the second and vice-versa. The seemingly never-ending discussion of the exceptionality of the rota system in Kyivan Rus' (which, as analysed further down, it is not really that exceptional) stems from the seeming inability of the first non-Slavic Varangian elites to differentiate between the two and to decide who gets exactly what. We cannot even fathom what the Slavs residing in the territory thought about this question, and our knowledge of inheritance systems in Scandinavia at that time is also quite limited. We will return to this point further down.

There are different terms to designate the geographical space under the rule of a prince, or *kniaz'*. The 'land of' (*zemlia*) seems to be a term applied equally to the Rus' (Русьская земля), to the country of the Hungarians (Угърская земля, col. 5,25) or that of the Bulgarians (земля Българская, col. 22,8). Even in the above-mentioned example, what Volodymyr is dividing between his sons is "his land" (земля его). It could be easily understood as country, or land inhabited by an ethnically differentiated people. In biblical references in the PVL, it is also used, for example, to describe the "country/land of the Egyptians," in opposition to the land of the Israelites. Later on, Soviet and Russian historiography attributed the meaning of 'land of' to those urban centres of various sizes who uniformly paid tribute to one of the big cities or to which legal obligations extended, as either Tikhomirov (1956) or Kuza (1989, 1996) did.<sup>14</sup> Another maybe synonymous term that is also used in the PVL that can be translated as 'dominion' is *власть/волость* (eg. 269, 32). Furthermore, the act or time of 'ruling' (княжения) is usually related to the formula "sit on the throne" (*sēdit' na stolē*), often used to specify when the ruling of a *kniaz'* starts (when he succeeds), as in the following example under the year 6586 (1078) (cols. 204,7–12), when Vsevolod takes over:

Начало княжения Всеволожа въ Киевѣ.

Всеволодъ же сѣде Киевѣ на столѣ отца своего и брата своего, преимѣ всю власть Русьскую. И посади сына своего Володимира въ Чърниговѣ, а Яропылка Володимири, придавъ ему Туровѣ.

Nevertheless, the PVL does not provide much information as to how all these dominions in the hands of various rulers were different from each other in terms, for example, of governance, if it is understood that 'principality,' like 'empire' or 'kingdom' or 'state,' is a political unit of independent governance.

13 Gerd Althoff has analysed in detail the personal and political bonds of members of the nobility in Germanic lands in *Family, Friends and Followers. Political and Social bonds in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2004), with which interesting parallels can be drawn and are analysed below.

14 Mikhail Tikhomirov, *Drevnerusskie goroda*; Andrei Kuza, *Malye goroda Drevnei Rusi and Drevnerusskie gorodishcha X—XIII vv.*

The first legal codes<sup>15</sup> contain few provisions about how law was applied within the borders of these different realms.<sup>16</sup> The Short version of *Russkaia Pravda* makes a difference between penalties if the criminal or the victim is Varangian or not, but does not say anything about different laws applying in different parts of Rus'. From its eighteen entries, as edited by Grekov, the first ten deal with personal crimes, from killing to pushing someone in the street, and the other eight with crimes against personal property (including slaves). Only article 13 mentions an interesting term, *mir*, that can be translated as a township or an urban centre of some kind. But it is not that easy. As Daniel Kaiser rightly states, *mir* "is rarely met in medieval sources, although it seems to have borne some territorial connotations."<sup>17</sup> Kaiser refers to other forms of "social organization" that appear in the *Russkaia Pravda* that deserve attention. He distinguishes the terms *mir*, *verv'* and *v'rvania* as "rural communal organizations" and the above-mentioned term *zemlia* which he translates as 'land,' discussing the limits of theft investigations, concluding that "each term demonstrates that its territorial meaning was not far removed from more traditional concepts of kinship and social organization."<sup>18</sup> In trying to narrow down a definition of which type of territorial entity was a *verv'* or a *v'rvania*, and whether it was linked to any settlement organised on principles of kinship, Kaiser looks for parallels in South Slavic terms, but even in that case a clear answer is elusive: if *verv'* and *v'rvania* are related to the South Slavic *vriv'* implying a relation of kinship, that hardly tells us anything about its translation as a geographically delimited area for administrative or legal purposes. That kinship is a principle of social organization is far too universal to be understood specifically.<sup>19</sup> However, he is absolutely right in proposing that the term for city, 'gorod', is clearly the only one whose understanding could not be solely based on kinship or ethnic relations between its members, like *mir*, *verv'*, or even *zemlia*, if only for the fact that "its origin was related primarily to economic needs, and its size governed only by the potential lure of profit."<sup>20</sup> Kaiser reckons that by the beginning of the fifteenth century there were ten genuine (*sic.*) cities in the Russian lands (excluding territories by then under Lithuania or Smolensk), and we have estimated that, during the time and area under study, there were eleven main cities. From all of them, of course the most famous, and indeed one that seems to have

15 The *Kormchaia Kniga* clearly predates the first secular legal documents, but, by its own nature, being a corpus of Church canon law and other religious texts, its application was expected to be uniform and universal across all the newly-converted Rus', that is, throughout all principalities or territories.

16 The editions of all these texts can be found in Valentin Ianin, *Zakonodatel'stvo Drevnei Rusi* (Moscow, 1984) and translations into English in Daniel H. Kaiser, *The Laws of Rus': tenth to fifteenth centuries* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1992), or George Vernadsky (trans.), *Medieval Russian laws* (New York, 1969). An in-depth analysis of law in medieval Rus' can be found in Daniel H. Kaiser, *The growth of the law in medieval Russia* (Princeton, 1980), 18–61.

17 Daniel H. Kaiser, *The growth of the law in medieval Russia* (Princeton, 1980), 181.

18 Daniel H. Kaiser, *The growth of the law in medieval Russia*, 177.

19 Daniel H. Kaiser, *The growth of the law in medieval Russia*, 178–179.

20 Daniel H. Kaiser, *The growth of the law in medieval Russia*, 184.

a particular status was Novgorod. The case of Novgorod, which was never referred to as ‘principality’ (княжество/княжение) in the sources, has been recently discussed by Pavel Lukin in comparison with Venice. He has concluded that, far from the traditional view that understood Novgorodian republicanism as emerging from early assembly policies focusing on the famous *veche*, which, by the way, other cities shared, it was a much complex movement of civic representation encouraged by economic empowerment of urban elites what produced the increasing antagonism between centre and periphery.<sup>21</sup>

The different corpora of early secular law also state, interestingly, that the forced removal of property is to be judged by the *svod* of the place from where it was removed (whether that might be a *mir* or a *gorod*), and not the place where it is found by its lawful owner, but there is no reference to the existence of two different laws (which might indicate a different administrative or governance unit) or of a different law in each territory within Rus’. There is, however, as mentioned above, an area within which a thief or a criminal can be sought or prosecuted, and this seems to be related either to the concept of *verv*’ in case of homicide, or the concept of *zemlia* in case of stolen goods. Again, trying to infer from this any clear demarcation, or who was its specific ruler seems a little bit far-fetched. Furthermore, such provision seems to be linked not to the principle of governance but to the advantage of having local witnesses recognising the stolen goods as belonging to their previous lawful owner.

The *Pravda* of Iaroslav’s sons (Iziaslav, Vsevolod and Sviatoslav) clearly reflects a more complex administration, adding a new list of civil servants, as well as crimes against whom they are judged differently. The Extended version of both consists of 121 articles (also according to Grekov’s edition) and the list of possible offences is longer, the casuistry is more complex, but still no part of their redaction allows us to surmise that a different legislation was in place in each distinctive territory. Probably the first geographically-encompassed code confidently dated is the charter of Pskov, dated to 1397.<sup>22</sup>

Princes’ *ustavy* (statutes) were legal documents specifying which crimes were to be judged by secular courts and which by religious ones. The latter had jurisdiction, as expected, over the crimes that had to do with religious practice and crimes occurring in the privacy of households. There are only much later manuscripts of the earliest ones attributed respectively to Volodymyr Sviatoslavych (d. 1015) and his son Iaroslav (d. 1054). In the earliest one, the term ‘principality’ (*kniazheniia*) is reserved exclusively to Kyiv (succession), and the rest of the territory is labelled as “*vsia zemlia Rus’kaia/Rus’taia*” (inheritances). That the jurisdiction of the Church,

21 Pavel Lukin, *Novgorod i Venetsiia. Sravnitel’no-istoricheskie ocherki stanovleniia respublikanskogo stroia* (St. Petersburg, 2022).

22 Most likely, the Pskov charter followed the model of Novgorod’s, whose fragmentary form has only survived in later copies. I thank Petr Stefanovich for the clarification and his constructive comments to this article.

and the Metropolitan, ignored other possible administrative demarcations is to be expected, but Volodymyr's statute insists that jurisdiction is granted in all towns, villages and settlements ("по всем городом, и по погостом и по свободам"). Only a much later statute attributed to a later Prince Vsevolod of Novgorod (difficult to identify which one), and dealing mainly with Novgorodian matters talks specifically about '*kniazhenii*,' principalities, in plural. The surviving manuscripts are equally later. This text mentions another interesting term, though, '*pogost*.' Although not mentioned in juridical literature, it also appears in the PVL at the very beginning, *sub anno* 6455 (947) in an interesting context: after her revenge on the Drevlians, Olga imposes a tribute on those she has not ordered to be killed or enslaved determining two thirds to go to Kyiv and one third to "her city", Vyshhorod (cols. 61,1–4), which one would imagine was understood as her inheritance, since she was keeping the throne of Kyiv (the succession) for her son Sviatoslav:

И възложи на ня дань тяжьку, двѣ части дани идета Киеву, а третьяя Вышегороду къ Ользѣ; бѣ бо Вышегородъ Ольжинъ градъ.

Olga then returns to Kyiv, and a year later establishes along the river Msta, in the region near Novgorod, '*pogosty*,' which were probably some sort of tax-collecting stations for those merchants using the river to move their goods. We also have references to these tax-collection centres in the eleventh-century charter of Rostislav in Smolensk and in the twelfth-century Sviatoslav Olgovich's in Novgorod. So the *pogosty*, usually placed in river banks and waterways, and certainly related etymologically with *gost*, a merchant or visitor, were "identifiable neither with a town nor a village, and consequently must have held a position that distinguished them from both."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the evidence that can be surmised from one birch-bark letter seems to point towards the city as the administrative and governing point in Kyivan Rus'. One of the oldest letters (N246) seems to be describing the legal procedure of *rubež*, which could be translated as 'confiscation'<sup>24</sup>:

From Žirovit to Stojan. It is the ninth year since you swore on the Cross in my presence, but you haven't sent me the money. If you don't send me four and a half grivnas, I'll have the property of the most distinguished Novgorodian confiscated on your account. Better send (the money) in a proper way.

The letter presents a case in which someone has left a debt unsettled, in this case a money promised but not paid, and the claimant threatens to seize the goods of a prominent visitor from the same city. As Jos Schaeken mentions "in accordance

<sup>23</sup> Daniel H. Kaiser, *The growth of the law in medieval Russia*, 182.

<sup>24</sup> The letter can be found at <http://gramoty.ru/birchbark/document/show/novgorod/246/>, and in Jos Schaeken's, *Voices on Birchbark. Messages from medieval Russia: daily life and communication* (Leiden, 2018), 74, whose translation I have used.

with the medieval notion of collective responsibility, the creditor had the right to seize the assets of a prominent visitor from the defaulter's city."<sup>25</sup> What is more important to our current question, however, is that it was the city, and not the principality or any other form of regional entity that played a role in legal disputes.

So, going back to the initial question, was it really necessary to draw lines of principalities in the time covered by our project? I don't think so. Not because we cannot know which city or town belonged to which land and when (and this is explicitly recorded in our map), but, firstly, because the lands changed hands from ruler to ruler, suffering subsequent changes of amalgamation and separation under different rulers over the time under study, making the question 'when?' impossible to avoid. And, secondly, because the process of gradual expansion of an emerging Rus' constantly pushed the borders of those lands, or eventually contracted them when foreign invasions happened. A map, however, is like a photograph, a still screenshot, that cannot reflect such a labile situation. Traditional approaches, conceived for paper supports, made those changes impossible to record if a long series of maps had to be avoided. A digital project like ours has allowed us to track chronologically the expansion of the lands, without having to enter the political question of who was at that time in charge of that particular land.

Rulers inherited from their father or uncle their lands and the associated privileges of collecting taxes in urban centres of different extension, which constituted their inheritance. And it was also obvious that they inherited the power to rule over these cities, villages and hamlets, to succeed him in office, to sit in his throne, which probably involved dictating justice (seemingly applying one common law), and eventually decide internal and external political alliances. However, the question of land *versus* inheritance, or land *versus* rulership is still pressing. When the eldest son of Volodymyr dies, he rearranges the succession, but tries not to leave anyone without inheritance. When Olga establishes *pogosty* in the river banks of the Msta, she is minding her inheritance, not altering her son's succession.

Commendable as it is to try to bring the history of Kyivan Rus' within the wider medieval European framework, unless we can more accurately describe, and not only within our own mental structures, what was the exact relation of these rulers with each other and how they made use of their respective inherited territories in the power game of Kyivan Rus', I am afraid we are going in circles. The problem of divided inheritance was certainly common in Europe at the time, and it was equally the main cause of the demise of the Merovingian kings. As Gerd Althoff has put it, the main problem for kin-groups was to reconcile "obvious incompatibility of the customs governing inheritance law and the demands of creating a lordship."<sup>26</sup> This was indeed a very similar scenario as the one in Rus':

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<sup>25</sup> Jos Schaeken, *Voices on Birchbark*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers. Political and Social bonds in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2004), 42.

According to Frankish laws, an inheritance was to be divided equally among all the legitimate sons. It is therefore easy to see how problems could arise if the inheritance included both offices and benefices. Even if it had been possible in certain cases to divide these properties, or to hold offices like duke or count jointly, the political authority inherent in the property or office would have been reduced. What is more, it was not at all clear how several holders of the same office would work together. During the Merovingian and the Carolingian periods, the royal office may have been divided like the private property of the ruling family whenever circumstances made such a division necessary, but the bloody series of family murders that characterised Merovingian history amply demonstrates the problems faced by a single kin-group as a result of this inheritance law. And it is certainly no coincidence that the Carolingians experienced their first real crisis as rulers when the division of the empire became a serious problem of the first time.<sup>27</sup>

The similarity of the challenges faced by Rus' ruling family (again, whether it is called dynasty, family or clan is secondary to me) makes them in this sense fully European. All new states had to articulate a system that would allow them to respond to new challenges as heads of state. Additionally, there was the shared difficulty for Germanic and Scandinavian peoples of Northern Europe for articulating their customary inheritance laws using the imported legal vocabulary, from either Latin or Greek, from an empire that had not faced such conundrum of dividing the inheritance between many siblings but keeping the succession in one single individual. Furthermore, their aid in formulating all these norms in writing could only come from clerics whose expertise in canon law, always aspiring to ecumenical universalism, was devoid of such territorial concerns. As Chris Wickham stated, "at the start of the middle ages, north-western Europe was divided in economic and social terms into two large, sharply contrasted regions: the former Roman empire in the lands south of the Rhine, and a wide though less clearly defined territory to its north, inhabited by Germanic-speaking groups as far north as central-northern Norway and, in the northern British Isles, Celtic-speaking groups, unified only by the fact that the Romans never conquered them."<sup>28</sup> Beyond the recurring discussion of what entitled to become a member of the 'Byzantine Commonwealth,' which I suspect is easier to explore in religious and cultural terms, it is likely that the Varangian elites arriving to Rus', despite much intermarriage and linguistic-adoption, had also brought with them, and tried to implement, the customs that had ruled inheritance and succession in their own lands. Unfortunately, our knowledge of them before the year 1000 is not very detailed either, mainly due to the lack of written sources. But some things might be inferred, though. Wickham argues that the "northern model, covering the Celtic-

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27 Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers*, 42.

28 Chris Wickham, "Social relations, property and power around the North Sea, 500–1000," *Social relations: property and power*, ed. by Bas J. P. van Bavel and Richard W. Hoyle (Turnhout, 2010), 25–47.

and the northern part of the German-speaking lands (and indeed eastwards into the Slavic-speaking world) was one in which most free peasants had much greater autonomy and, often, full ownership over their lands; aristocrats were less wealthy, although they often had strong patronage rights over their peasant neighbours; and the only really rich people were rulers, who accumulated (not necessarily very heavy) tributes from landowners both rich and poor. A tendency for aristocratic and royal power to increase in this second model at the expense of peasant autonomy is not to be doubted, but it was incomplete by 1000, and in some areas (such as Norway) had hardly started.”<sup>29</sup> In the particular case of Scandinavia, some further points could be made: firstly, old Norse communities as kin-based societies (*ættesamfunn*) and, secondly, and contrary to what was traditionally believed, it is far from clear that family (*ætt*) or individual and personally free peasant households owned the great majority of the land before 1000. Rather, it was an elite of big men or chiefs who controlled substantial parts of rural Norway. The changes in the ownership and tenancy models that are going to take place in Scandinavia between 1000–1350 do not concern us here, but one could reasonably surmise that the expectation of the Varangians arriving to Rus’ from the ninth century onwards was to replicate a similar model from the one they had known back home<sup>30</sup>. And, in relation to inheritance in Scandinavia we know that “according to medieval codes of law, regional differences existed in inheritance systems” and that, for example, “in Sweden inheritance rules deferred between movable property and inherited land”<sup>31</sup>.

The definition of principalities as any form of autonomous or independently governed geographical area does not match the evidence provided in legal or any other sources. The chroniclers narrate, often inspired by biblical sources where such fights were recurrent, the common, and often petty skirmishes, of princelings fighting for succession, and maybe sometimes for inheritance, in an attempt to find a reason behind a divinely-inspired punishment that would justify the invasion of their land by infidels. But chronicles are narrations, and the realities lived by ordinary people do not seem to match any claims of differentiated governance. It is almost like expecting that the narration of what happened at Kuntsevo really reflected how people lived in the USSR.

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29 Chris Wickham, “Social relations, property and power around the North Sea, 500-1000,” 37.

30 John Ragnar Myking and Carsten Porskrog Rasmussen, “Scandinavia, 1000–1750.” *Social relations: property and power*, ed. by Bas J. P. van Bavel and Richard W. Hoyle (Turnhout, 2010), 287–312.

31 Carl-Johan Gadd, Hans Christian Johansen, Thomas Lindkvist, “Scandinavia, 1000–1750,” *Making a living: family, labour and income*, ed. by E. Vanhaute, Isabelle Devos, Thijs Lambrecht and Gérard Béaur (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 265–291 (here 275–276).