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Keywords

Primary Chronicle; St. Olga; Svyatoslav; Pechenegs; horse tack; bridle; hippophagy.

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¹ "Rusian" is an adjective derived from the noun "Rus", as distinct from "Russian," derived from the noun "Russia."

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I. Introduction. The geography of horse histories and the place of medieval Rus' therein

The “animal turn” in the humanities has led to a steady increase of research into medieval horse history. Just a decade ago the main – and often only – critical studies of medieval horse history were the publications by R. H. C. Davis, *The Medieval Warhorse: Origin, Development and Redevelopment* (1989), and a series of books on premodern horses by Ann Hyland (*The Medieval Warhorse from Byzantium to the Crusades*,

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² “Russian” is an adjective derived from the noun “Rus”, as distinct from “Russian,” derived from the noun “Russia.”

1996; *The Warhorse 1250-1600*, 1998). The archaeological study of medieval English horse equipment based on chance findings in London, *The Medieval Horse and Its Equipment*, edited by John Clark, has gone through several editions since its publication in 1995. In the recent years, a number of new monographs and edited volumes on the subject have been produced in English, French and Italian languages: these include *Art et science vétérinaire à Byzance: Formes et fonctions de l'image hippiatrice* (2010), *Le cheval dans la culture médiévale* (2015), *Le cheval au Moyen Age* (2017) and many others, not to mention studies of veterinary and hippiatric treatises, as well as separate articles in archaeology, zooarchaeology and military studies. However, the studies have mostly concentrated on horses in medieval Europe. Ann Hyland's focus was broader, including Byzantine and the Near East, but she mentioned medieval Rus' only briefly in *The Medieval Warhorse from Byzantium to the Crusades*.

More recent publications on equine history likewise keep silent on the issue of horses in medieval Rus', with fewer scholars working on medieval horse history venturing outside European regions. The title of *The Horse in Premodern European Culture*, edited by Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson and published in January 2020 is indicative of this tendency, albeit a more recent volume by the same editors, *Studies on Horses and Their Effects on Medieval Societies* (2022) is broader in geographic scope, encompassing not only Byzantium, but also China and the Tangut Empire. However, the volume currently in preparation by Miriam Bibby, *Saints and Sinners on Horseback*, includes examples of horse and human interactions in both early Islamic literature and medieval Rus', including the evidence of *The Primary Chronicle*.

The paucity of studies in horse history – and animal history more generally – when concerned with the culture of medieval Rus' may be occasioned by the unavailability of numerous primary and secondary sources in non-Slavic languages, which certainly constitutes a barrier to anglophone scholars.³ The other reason is that, for medievalists, the primary questions to be asked when studying medieval Rus' relate to christianisation of the territory, ecclesiastical and secular power, art history, and, more recently, the use of medieval history in modern culture (medievalism). This is in contrast with the studies in prehistory, where archaeological studies of horse burials, horse-driven chariots and horse harness have been long established, with the Pazyryk and Arzhan burial sites being known even to non-specialists.

II. Material and methods for the study of horses in the literary landscape of medieval Rus'

The study of horses and horsemanship, its practicalities and cultural significance in medieval Rus' has two-fold value. First and foremost, it adds to our knowledge of the variety of premodern horse cultures, which in itself would necessitate more research into this relatively neglected (in terms of horse history) geopolitical entity.

³ The few titles in animal history of medieval Rus' are mostly in local Russian journals, see, for instance, Александр Цвельх [Aleksandr Tsvelykh], “Загадочные летописные животные Киевской Руси” [Mysterious Chronicle Animals of Kievan Rus'], *Природа* [Nature] 2 (2021), https://elementy.ru/nauchno-populyarnaya_biblioteka/436146/Zagadochnnye_letopisnye_zhivotnye_Kievskoy_Rusi?from=bxblock (accessed November 28, 2022) and references therein.

Second, it can indirectly enhance our understanding of the culture of medieval Rus', which, in the current political situation, is a hot topic of discussion. Namely, was medieval Rus' an outsider, an "other" or "foil" to medieval Europe, or was it part of medieval Europe?⁴ It is not the purpose of this brief study to provide evidence for either argument, but further understanding of the cultural of horsemanship of medieval Rus' can, in comparison with the equestrian cultures of Europe and Asia, contribute to a more nuanced view of the way in which medieval Rus' participated in the exchange of ideas, practices, knowhows and products on the continent. I also hope to query the idea of Europe and Asia being two distinct entities, with Rus' belonging to either of them or serving as a watershed or significant "other" to both in favour of a more inclusive view of medieval culture, which was not informed by the modern ideas of nationhood, statehood, and ethnic identity.

The sources for studying horses and horsemanship of medieval Rus' encompass iconographic evidence, including religious art, such as frescoes, icons, and tapestries, as well as manuscript illuminations. It should be noted that, unlike in Europe, where richly illuminated manuscripts often contained chivalric romances, in Rus', illumination and decoration were reserved for texts that were termed "useful," namely, the scripture, devotional, didactic and theological works, saints' lives and historiography. The so-called "less useful" texts, which were not chronicles but narratives designed to educate but also entertain the audience, were deemed less worthy of illustration. Thus, chronicles were either illuminated or decorated, but the collection of stories about Count Dracula by a fifteenth-century Muscovite diplomat was executed in cursive script and only has a few red-ink initials. The exception was "cosmographies," which today's audience might view as collections of the world's marvels, but which were in fact designed to educate the reader about the phenomena of divine creation and hence were subject of lavish illustration, including the drawings of different equids, among them such fantastic creatures as the unicorn and the "water horse."

This study considers only one main source, the *Primary Chronicle* (*Повѣсть времѣнныхъ лѣтъ* in Rusonian, also known as the Tale of Bygone Years), in two redactions: the Laurentian codex for the text and the Radziwill manuscript for illuminations. The Primary Chronicle is believed to have been composed in the eleventh century by St. Nestor the Chronicler (c. 1056-c.1114) and revised in the twelfth century, but the earliest manuscript, the so-called Laurentian Codex, dates to the fourteenth century (1377). The chronicle survives in two more manuscripts, the Hypatian Codex and the richly illuminated Radziwill manuscript,⁵ both produced in

⁴ For the latter view, see Christian Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus' in the Medieval World, 988–1146* (Harvard University Press, 2012). For the dubious political uses to which both views can be put, see Christian Raffensperger, "Ukraine as Europe: Medieval and Modern," www.medievalists.net/2022/02/ukraine-as-europe-medieval-and-modern/ (accessed November 28, 2022).

⁵ The Radziwill manuscript, also known as the Königsberg manuscript is preserved by the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg. A digital version of the chronicle is available from <http://radzivilovskaya-letopis.ru/index.php?id=46#sel> (accessed October 8, 2022). The miniatures are available from https://runivers.ru/doc/rusland/letopisi/?SECTION_ID=19639&PAGEN_1=2 (accessed October 8, 2022).

the fifteenth century. The Laurentian codex, which is one of the most complete and extensively studied manuscripts, is preserved at the National Library of Russia (NLR, F.n.IV.2); it was produced in Novgorod, and the principal scribe monk, Lavrentij (Laurence), has signed his name on the codex, a common practice in the medieval Rus'.⁶

The Radziwill codex (also known as the Königsberg codex) codex is believed to be a copy of a thirteenth-century lost original, which may have been illustrated as well: this makes the Radziwill codex and its supposed source different from other surviving codices of the Primary Chronicle, which usually only have only ornamental frontispieces and coloured initials, as in the Laurentian codex. The name of Radziwill codex derives from its early owners, the royal Radziwill family of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in whose possession the manuscript was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is currently preserved in St. Petersburg, the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 34.5.30.⁷

The *Primary Chronicle* has been edited and translated into English by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor on the basis of the Laurentian codex in 1953. This authoritative translation will be used in the text, unless indicated otherwise. As argued in the article, some details that relate to horsemanship, horse tack and equestrian practice are not always rendered in a reliable way or at least there is room for alternative reading, which does not as a whole undermine the value of the work. It is through respect to the work of Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, as well as generations of scholars who worked on the subject before and after them, that the author of the study decided to use the spelling “Kievan Rus’” for the historical state that operated between the late ninth and the middle of the thirteenth century and “Kiev” when referring to its capital, reserving the spelling “Kyiv” for the capital of the modern state of Ukraine.

Among the sources of the Primary chronicle are earlier chronicles of Rus', Byzantine annals, *byliny* (oral epic narrative poems), and, significantly, Norse sagas, as the early rulers of Kievan Rus', known as the Rusonians or the Russes, depending on the translation, were of Scandinavian descent. While the *Primary Chronicle* contains numerous and important references to horses and horsemanship, this study will consider only three episodes where horses that are physically absent but whose presence is implied either by direct reference to a horse or by metonymy, referring to objects of equipment associated with horses, such as the saddle and the bridle, as narrated in the Laurentian codex. All the episodes are related to the rule of Svyatoslav I, the son of St. Olga and Igor I and grand prince of Kievan Rus' from 945 to 972 CE.

⁶ All quotations from the Primary Chronicle are drawn from the Laurentian codex. The transcriptions are based on the transcriptions available from the Russian National Library, which presents manuscript pages alongside transcription in Rusonian and translation into modern Russian: https://expositions.nlr.ru/LaurentianCodex/Project/page_Show.php (accessed October 8, 2022).

⁷ Oleksiy Tolochko, “Radziwill Chronicle,” in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, ed. Graeme Dunphy and Cristian Bratu (Leiden: Brill, 2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2213-2139_emc_SIM_02133 (accessed June 9, 2022).

II. “Has anyone seen my horse?” Svyatoslav’s adventures and elusive equines

Three episodes where the horse is absent, but its presence is implied or imagined, are introduced by the chronicler in relation to the rule of Svyatoslav I. The first is the description of Svyatoslav’s nomadic lifestyle, when he sleeps with a saddle under his head while on campaign and eats meat (including horsemeat, as well as game) baked on open fire.

The narrative, given on fol. 19r of the Laurentian codex, reads as follows:

В лето 6472. Князю Святославу възрастѣшу и възмужавшю, нача вон совкупляти многи и храбры и легъко ходя, аки пардусъ, войны многи творяше. Ходя возъ бо по собе не возяше, ни котъла, ни мясь варя, но потонку изрезавъ конину, ли зверину, ли говядину, на углех испекъ, ядяху, ни шатра имяше, но подъкладъ пославъ, и седло в головахъ; тако же и прочии вон его вси бяху. Посылаше къ странамъ, глаголя: «Хочю на вы ити». И иде на Оку реку и на Волгу, и налезе вятичи и рече вятичемъ: «Кому дань даете?» Они же реша: «Козаромъ по шълягу и от рала даемъ». (fol. 19r)

[6472 (964). When Prince Svyatoslav had grown up and matured, he began to collect a numerous and valiant army. Stepping light as a leopard, he undertook many campaigns. Upon his expeditions, he carried neither wagons nor kettles, and boiled no meat, but cut off small strips of horseflesh, game, or beef, and ate it after roasting it on the coals. Nor did he have a tent, but he spread out a horse-blanket under him [saddlecloth], and set his saddle under [at] his head; and all his retinue did likewise. He sent messengers to other lands announcing his intention to attack them [*literally* saying: “I want to go against you”]. He went to the Oka and the Volga, and, on coming in contact with the Viatichians, he inquired of them to whom they paid tribute. They made answer that they paid a silver-piece per ploughshare to the Khazars.⁸

Svyatoslav went and attacked the Khazars, coming out victorious and taking their settlement Byela Vezha, and he also conquered the Ias and the Kasogs, and the Viatych. In 967, he would also challenge the Bulgarians, overcoming them and taking their cities. Basically, despite the fact his mother, Olga, was a Christian, Svyatoslav remained essentially a nomad, and he refused Christianity. He exacted tribute from the Greeks, not having much regard for the fact that it was in Greece that his mother Olga had been baptized.

⁸ Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans. and ed., *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), 84. The comments in square brackets are my own. As obvious from the comments, the translators changed instances of direct speech in Laurentian codex to the indirect speech, but only the first such instance is indicated in square brackets here.

In this translation, one of the few imprecisions in the work of Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor are found. The term translated as “horse blanket” (*ποδκλαδὴ* in the original) makes better sense if translated as “saddlecloth.” The word *ποδκλαδὴ* literally means any textile that is laid under something else, so saddlecloth, laid under a saddle, is a better match. Besides, a horse blanket is used to cover a horse in inclement weather, after great exertion or in other circumstances where an animal needs additional protection: this practice is well attested in medieval Europe, with Froissart in his *Debate of the Horse and the Greyhound* making the greyhound refer to the practice as one of the benefits the horse enjoys.⁹ Thus, a warrior travelling light, as Svyatoslav does, is unlikely to be burdened by such an object, and, if he needed it, the rightful place of a horse blanket would be on a horse, not under Svyatoslav!



Fig. 1. Meeting between Emperor John Tzimiskes and Svyatoslav I of Kiev in the Madrid Skylitzes, The National Library of Spain, History of Byzantium, fol. 172rb.

The other tiny but significant ambiguity in reading and understanding the text is the positioning of the saddle. Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor suggest it was set *under* Svyatoslav’s head, possibly in the manner of a pillow. The original, *в головахъ*, would support both prepositions “under” and “at,” with “at the head” appearing to be a somewhat more preferable reading. Albeit medieval saddles could be used as seats or stools, they were unlikely to have served as ergonomic pillows for a person lying on the ground because of the elevation. It would have also involved putting one’s head between the high front and rear cantles of the saddle, which would restrained the sleeper’s vision in the case of a sudden alarm. The medieval illumination from the twelfth-century manuscript of *Madrid Skylitzes (Synopsis of Histories)*¹⁰ showing the meeting between John Tzimiskes and Svyatoslav, albeit not contemporary with

⁹ See the discussion of this and other care practice in Anastasija Ropa, “Counting Your Blessings in Froissart’s ‘Debate of the Horse and the Greyhound’,” in *The Materiality of the Horse*, ed. Miriam A. Bibby and Brian G. Scott (Budapest: Trivent, 2020).

¹⁰ Vasiliki Tsamakda, *The Illustrated Chronicle of Ioannes Skylitzes* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). A digitized copy of the manuscript is available from the World Digital Library, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667859> (accessed November 29, 2022).

Svyatoslav's lifetime, is closer to the date of the composition of the *Primary Chronicle* (see Fig. 1). The illumination shows Svyatoslav's horse saddled with a saddle of the type common in Europe, with high front and rear cantles. Though both readings of "saddlecloth" for *подъкладъ* and "at his head" for *в головахъ* are apparently minor corrections, they enhance our impression of Svyatoslav being a dedicated, astute warrior, more of an uncultured pagan than his enlightened mother, but also an expert horseman and more than a match for the rulers of nomadic tribes whose territories bordered on those of Kievan Rus'.

However, campaigning around too much was not without its perils. In 968, the Pechenegs attacked Rus while Svyatoslav was away, and his mother did not have much choice. She went to Kiev with her grandsons and closed the gates. The siege was hard, and the people suffered from hunger and thirst. They besieged could see their people on the opposite bank of the Dnieper, but could not send a message. At last, a courageous lad offered to go and take the message that, if the reinforcements did not deliver the city the next day, they would have to surrender. The lad found an ingenious and daring way of sneaking to the Rus forces. He took a bridle in his hand and ran to the Pecheneg camp, loudly asking if anyone has seen the horse:

Он же изиде изъ града с уздою и ристаша сквозе печенеги, глаголя: «Не виде ли коня никтоже?» Бе бо умея печенежьски, и мня хуть ня своего. Яко приближися к рече, свергъ порты, сунуся въ Днепръ, и побреде. Видевше же печенези устремишася на нь, стреля юще его, и не могоша ему ничтоже створити. (fol. 19v)

[he went out of the city with a bridle in his hand, and ran among the Pechenegs shouting out a question whether anyone had seen a horse. For he knew their language, and they thought he was one of themselves. When he approached the river, he threw off his clothes, jumped into the Dnieper, and swam out.] (85)

A boat was sent, and he delivered his message.

Again, this shows the prominence of horses for both sides, as well as the fact that the Pechenegs, close if worrying neighbours of the Rus (see Fig. 2), were no strangers. A boy could be found who could speak the Pecheneg so well that none in the enemy camp suspected him but accepted him as "one of themselves." Also, it would be interesting to see where he would get the right clothes, or whether some clothes would not show any ethnic difference between the two groups. The fact that he could undress so quickly once on the riverbank suggests he might have been running barefoot, in just cloth breeches and a shirt, which would go along perfectly with his story of a runaway horse. The bridle, too, must have been of such design as to raise no question among the Pechenegs.



Fig. 2. Map showing the major Varangian trade routes, the Volga trade route (in red) and the Trade Route from the Varangians to the Greeks (in purple). Other trade routes from the eighth to the eleventh centuries shown in orange. Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Varangian_routes.png

(accessed January 9, 2023).¹¹

The Radziwill manuscript shows the scene dramatically, with the naked messenger reaching the river, a bridle on his shoulder, as a Pecheneg warrior is aiming an arrow at him (Fig. 3). The bridle is sketched in a very cursory way, appearing as a construction of leather strips, with possibly a snaffle bit. The part on the messenger's shoulder could be a ring of the snaffle, which is consistent with the representation of bits on icons with mounted saints throughout the medieval and early modern periods. A note of caution must be sounded, though, that, because the Radziwill codex belongs to the end of the fifteenth century, it is far more likely to reflect the material realia of its time than those of the time of Nestor the Chronicler and still less those of Svyatoslav's rule in the tenth century. Still, the bridle can be compared to the representation of the same object on a subsequent miniature that shows the truce between the Pechenegs and the Rus'.

The outcome of the story is that the party on the opposite banks decides to send boats to deliver Olga and her grandsons, fearing Svyatoslav's anger, if they were slain. On seeing the boats, the Pechenegs thought it was Svyatoslav himself and fled. The Pecheneg chief addressed the band's leader, whom he thought to be Svyatoslav. Pretich explained that he was Svyatoslav's man with his advances, warning his enemy that the knyaz's innumerable forces were following closely. The Pecheneg chief offered friendship, which was readily received, and an exchange of gifts followed.

¹¹ For more information on the Varangian trade routes, see Geoffrey Barraclough, ed. *Spectrum-Times Atlas van de Wereldgeschiedenis* (S. R. Admiraal Print Book, 1981), 114–115.

The Pecheneg gave Pretich a horse, a sabre and arrows and was in return given a coat of mail, a shield and a sword: “И подаста руку межю собою, и въдасть печенежский князь Претичю конь, саблю, стрелы. Онъ же дасть ему броне, щитъ, мечъ.” (fol. 20r) In this instance, the translation of Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor contradicts the reading of the Laurentian codex, as the translation omits the gift of the horse, substituting it by “his spear”: “The two shook hands on it, and the Prince of the Pechenegs gave Pretich his spear, sabre, and arrows, while the latter gave his own breastplate, shield, and sword” (86). The word in the Laurentian codex is *конь*, which is a horse, and likely a warhorse, and there is no third-person possessive pronoun. There is also no reason why the Prince of the Pechenegs should give Svyatoslav’s commander his own princely belonging, be it a weapon or an animal. Neither is there suggestion that Pretich gave back his personal breastplate and other weapons. It is an exchange of customary gifts between the two warriors, though the gifts of Pretich are different in that they are less associated with nomadic lifestyle than the Pecheneg gifts. Here, we see the gradual turning in the career of Svyatoslav (and Kievan Rus’) towards a less nomadic, more Christian lifestyle, implicitly, as the chronicler strongly suggests by highlighting Olga’s piety after her baptism, through the prayers of the future saint.



Fig. 3. The Radziwill codex, flight of the messenger.

The miniature in the Radziwill codex depicts this episode, showing the exchange of gifts (Fig. 4). The Pecheneg prince is mounted on a decked out white horse and is offering a sabre to the Rus’ reinforcements, which arrive by boat. The Pecheneg’s horse wears a bridle with double reins, a breast strap and a crupper, whereas the Pecheneg himself has long spurs on his feet. The equestrian equipment in this miniature does not represent the enemy as being distinct from the Rus’ mounted warriors, and it is only the sabre, as opposed to the swords yielded by the Rus’, that differentiates the two.

After the exchange of gifts, the Pechenegs retreated, but not too far. The chronicler comments that “Отступища печенези от града, и не бяше льзе коня

напоити: на Лыбеди печенези” (fol. 20r) [The Pechenegs raised the siege, and for a time the inhabitants could no longer water their horses at the Lybbed] (86). The inhabitants of Kiev subsequently sent messengers to Svyatoslav, reproaching him for seeking to conquer strange lands and neglecting the protection of his own. This was true, and Svyatoslav immediately returned, drove away the Pechenegs to their “steppe” and restored peace in the land. Again, in this instance, the care of the horses is paramount. Either the people of Kiev were well provisioned with water, or the fact the defendants may have been lacking water is secondary to the fact their steeds needed to be taken care of.



Fig. 4. The Radziwill codex. Temporary truce between the Pechenegs and Pretich.

IV. Conclusion. Interpreting the absent horses of Svyatoslav’s story today

A brief analysis from just two stages in Svyatoslav’s life demonstrates several instances of horses being involved in the history of Kievan Rus’ in meaningful ways. While on some occasions horses are physically absent from the scene, their implicit or imaginary presence constitutes a key to interpreting the episodes in the culture where the horse was an important asset in warfare and travelling. The gift of a horse by the Pechenegs to a Rusian war leader in the final episode acts as a reminder of the slight difference in the significance of horses between the nomadic Pechenegs and the Rusians, who are about to become Christians. The dangerous attack on Kiev becomes a turning point in Svyatoslav’s career, which makes him abandon his conquests and devote his energies to the defence of his land.

From this very cursory exploration of the *Primary Chronicle’s* textual and visual sources, we can see Kievan Rus’ as a dynamic entity in the making, with elements of pagan, nomadic and horse-informed lifestyle being transformed, according to the chronicler’s design, into Christian, settled culture, a process to which horses and

riders are witnesses. This Rus' is neither "Asian" nor "European" nor "other," and not to be confused with any of the twenty-first century geopolitical entity. Instead, medieval Rus' is a dynamic, multi-layered entity, which refuses to serve any modern historian's ideological narrative, being created, palimpsest-like, through the agencies of chroniclers, copyists, and illuminators of the medieval period.

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