Polovtsy contacts in the house of Vladimir-Suzdalia  
John of Plano Carpini’s Account of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich’s retinue in 1246

Isoaho, Mari

2015

Isoaho, M 2015, 'Polovtsy contacts in the house of Vladimir-Suzdalia  John of Plano Carpini’s Account of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich’s retinue in 1246 : [>=B0:BK A
>2F0<8 2>:048<8@>-!C740;LA;<<:=O65AB25  =0 >A=>20=88 >?8A0=8O 6>20==8
;0=> 0@?8=8 ?>2545=8O A28B ' Rossica Antiqua , no. 2 , pp. 44-70 .

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/174804

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.
Mari Isoaho

Polovtsy contacts in the house of Vladimir-Suzdalia – John of Plano Carpini’s Account of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich’s retinue in 1246*

In the medieval world the public and the personal were closely connected, and personal relations were of key importance in the public political arena. There were none of the limits between public and personal that we are used to today, and for the ruling aristocrat, things that we might consider personal were public. The personal relationships of kinship and personal alliances were the main tools used to keep order in medieval society. Political communication depended on confidentiality, restricted to a very small circle of
people which every ruler had cultivated\(^1\). Although research into medieval Rus’ practices of power has been fairly active\(^2\), the fact remains that the most important ways of influencing princely power were personal. By investigating the personal contacts and the careers of influential persons who held the power in their society, prosopographers hope to acquire a better understanding of the power structure of medieval society. In this article I apply this method in order to investigate the power mechanisms of the princely house of Vladimir-Suzdal in the early thirteenth century, by examining the personal contacts of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich (1191–1246)\(^3\).

The historical significance of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich has undergone under some re-estimation, as he has recently been elevated from the shadows of his renowned son, Alexander Nevskiy. A. N. Nesterenko and Mikhail Sokol’skiy in particular have presented him as a sinister and lustful figure, a ruthless conspirator, who did everything he could to assume the throne of Vladimir\(^4\). The power struggle between the Rus’ princes, their constant confrontations and internal wars, has prompted many historians to

---


question the practices of medieval power\textsuperscript{5}. Although it is true that he was actively involved with many military expeditions, causing havoc to his enemies far and near, and also becoming embroiled in family disputes, I think it is essential to view his actions in the light of the cultural practices which prevailed in his days.

As Prince Yaroslav belonged to the inner circle of the power hierarchy in the medieval Rurikovich circles, he had an extensive social network. The task of analyzing his web of personal contacts, however, is very problematic, since the Russian medieval chronicles include only few details of Yaroslav’s personal life, as they focused on events that were beyond ordinary, everyday life. The chronicles inform us only of the most important facts and turning points in his career, the changes in his position in the Rus’ power balance, his wars and peace negotiations. Yaroslav had an extremely wide net of contacts, and the geographical space within which he physically manoeuvred was huge. Within Rus’ society, he managed to occupy – at least for a while – the thrones of Pereyaslavl Russkiy, Galich, Ryazan, Novgorod, Pereyaslavl Zalesskiy, Vladimir, and Kiev. As a military leader he campaigned against Finns (em/yam) – extending his campaign further north than any Russian prince before him, Estonians (chudi), Mordvinians, Lithuanians, Teutonic Knights, as well as the Polovtsy. Yaroslav’s activity meant that his diplomatic contacts reached from the Roman pope to the great khan of Karakorum, covering a geographical width of nearly 7,000 kilometres.

Thus we get a picture of a very active man with a broad and diverse network of contacts. Apart from the contacts with foreign rulers, Yaroslav naturally had an extensive set of closer relations, both to other Rus’ princely families, as well as various nomadic

\textsuperscript{5} Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard argued that dynastic rivalry did not lead to the weakening of Rus’, as suggested in the often-cited term, «feudal fragmentation». Instead of weakness they see dynastic flexibility where the rivalry was a constant and probably essential component of Rus’ internal politics, being a positive advantage in the exploration and exploitation of new opportunities. Franklin S., Shepard J. The Emergence of Rus 750–1200. London, 1996. P. 368. See also: Назаренко А. В. Древняя Русь и славяне. М., 2009. С. 87.
groups of the steppe, which are not covered in detail in the chronicles. Thus, Yaroslav’s activity in the field of medieval power politics was considerable – he was a person with immense power and a huge network of personal contacts. In this article I shall examine the core of the prince’s power, his family relations and the people in his closest retinue, those who travelled by his side.

Since the chronicle sources do not reveal much about his personal contacts, a great deal of the most important and interesting information comes from John of Plano Carpini, a Franciscan friar who travelled on the pope’s mission. Friar John met Prince Yaroslav personally, in Karakorum in 1246. Thanks to information found in Plano Carpini’s History of the Mongols, which he wrote around 1247/1248, and the contents of pope Innocent IV’s letter to Yarsolav’s son, Alexander (later known as a hero and warrior saint with the additional name Nevskiy), we have a rare glimpse of names of the persons who travelled in the prince’s retinue, and who were in contact with him in 1246. In the light of these sources, interesting questions are raised about Prince Yaroslav’s relationship with the steppe, and particularly his ties with the Polovtsy.

The Nature of the Rus’–Polovtsy contacts

Traditionally, the relationship between the Rus’ and the Polovtsy has been viewed in the light of chronicle accounts, which focus largely on military conflicts. The impact of the steppe in the history of Europe and Western Eurasia is currently undergoing a new wave of investigation, revealing new information and alternative interpretations of the history and archeology of the Western Eurasian nomads6. The archaeological evidence sug-

gests that in most cases the Slavic and eastern nomadic cultures mingled with each other, so that nomads adopted much of the Slavic agricultural habits and material culture and, conversely, the Slavs took up much of the nomadic cattle and horse-raising culture. The early Rus’ state as it formed, was multi-ethnic, and the relationship between Rus’ and the Steppe had much more complex than is suggested by the one-sided chronicle writing. One particularly neglected area is the Rus’ – Polovtsy economic relationship.

The Rus’ state represented a sedentary society whose economy was based on an agriculture, where one’s living was bound to the land and settlements were permanent. On the other hand, situated in the fringes of the vast Eurasian Steppe, the economy of the Polovtsy was based on a nomadic lifestyle. It is important to note that nomadism is not as self-sufficient a system as agriculture, as Anatoly M. Khazanov has demonstrated. Fully developed nomadism requires agricultural interrelation, because the products and supplies achieved with cattle are simply not enough to cover human needs. The agricultural people of the Rus’ needed cattle and Steppe horses, but even more vitally Steppe nomads needed grain, clothes, and weapons, and they acquired them from their sedentary neighbours. The exchange of products through raiding, trading, or – like Mongols – conquering, resulted in greater specialization in nomadic culture. Thus, for a monocultural nomadic society contacts were of vital importance, because specialization meant increasing dependency on sedentary polities. Therefore it is very likely that some kind of market for the exchange of these goods existed. When examining Rus’–Polovtsy contacts, this exchange required traders, towns and market places.

Along with increasing opportunities for exchange and trade, nomads also received payment for military service. This dependency led to the practice where the nomads were military auxiliaries and allies of the Rus’ princes, and the wars among the Rus’ princes

---


were often decided according to whose nomadic auxiliaries fought better. Much of the nomadic devastation of the southern Rus’ lands was therefore a by-product of the Rus’ military and political system – a system in which nomads replaced Vikings as mercenaries. The process of co-operation with nomad auxiliaries became a permanent part of the Rus’ military system, a fact not clearly stated in the chronicles. Co-operation was confirmed by marital alliances, where generally a nomadic princess would be married to the Rurikid prince. The primary purpose of these marital alliances, from a sedentarist’s standpoint, was to secure nomadic military assistance.

The fundamental difference in the economy and lifestyle between agricultural and nomad people no doubt caused difficulties for those who farmed and cultivated the land, as did differences in faith. The specialized nomadic economy with its distinctive way of life, worldview, cultural values and ideals invoked colorful images, fed by religious conceptions. The two worlds – Rus’ and Steppe – also offered each other models for comparison, imitation, or rejection. One of the basic problems when looking at the chronicles, (the most important source when studying medieval Russian history) is that they contain internal tensions, especially in their descriptions of the Polovtsy. From the Primary Chronicle onwards, they were treated in the chronicle tradition of Kiev as the arch enemy, being presented as the filthy eschatological people who ravage the land just before the second coming of the Lord and the world’s end.

Although the Polovtsy remained one of the most important allies of various Russian princely dynasties, their assimilation to princely families seldom, if ever, received comment in the chroni-

---

10 Khazanov, Nomads and the Outside world. P. XXXI–XXXIII.
icles, as the Polovtsy girls just became Orthodox princesses, knyagini, with new Christian names. However, of all the sedentary states of Western Eurasia, the Rus’ were most directly affected by the Steppe.

The dynasty of Vladimir-Suzdal had family ties to the Polovtsy as early as 1109, when Vladimir Monomakh took a daughter of Aepa Asenevich for his son Yuri, who at that time was around 13–15 years of age. Yuri was married several times, and it is somewhat risky to speculate about the offspring of his marriages, but it is often stated that from this Polovtsy marriage were born at least his sons Gleb and Andrei Bogolybskiy, both of whom held a strong grip on the power politics of the Rurikids. Therefore, we can conclude that there was already a century-old tradition of dynastic contacts to the steppe in the Suzdalian dynasty alone, let alone the Chernigov and other principalities of the Russian lands, each of which had their own sets of family ties.

*Family relations of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich*

Thus, the mixture of Rus’ and nomadic society was implemented in aristocratic Rus’ princely families. S.T. Katanchev underlined the strong influence of the steppe nomads in the raising of young princes in a society where the sedentary Slavic world and the nomadic world of the Steppe met in the Rus’ aristocracy’s court and family life. It is probable that Prince Yaroslav’s mother belonged to the nomadic tribe of Yass, which would have enhanced the mutual linguistic and cultural understanding of this

---

12 Of the family ties to nomad folks, see especially: Катанчиев С. Т. Александр Невский – правнук кипчакского (полоцекого) хана Котяна. Нальчик, 2008. С. 23–49.

13 Там же. С. 103.

It is interesting to examine Yaroslav’s personal history in this context. In the medieval diplomatic world, family relations were of the utmost importance, and marriages were by far the most effective way to make, secure, and maintain\textsuperscript{15}.

According to the \textit{Laurentian Chronicle}, Prince Yaroslav was born on the eighth day of February sub anno 6698 (most probably in January–February of 1191 A. D.), and was given the Christian name Feodor\textsuperscript{16}. On the third of August, sub anno 6709, (3.8.1200 A.D.), when he was nine years of age, his father, Vsevolod Yur’evich, placed him «on the throne of his father and grandfather» in the Pereyaslavl Russkiy\textsuperscript{17}. While being in southern Rus’ young Yaroslav participated in the joint operation against the Polovtsov, after which the peace was strengthened by the marriage of Prince Yaroslav with the daughter of a distinguished Polovtsov khan, Yuri Konchakovichi\textsuperscript{18}.

In 1212 Yaroslav’s father, Vsevolod, died and his sons were soon divided into two rival groups. The two factions were intertwined with the policy of Mstislav Mstislavich Udaloy, the powerful Prince of Novgorod at that time. Even though Yaroslav’s faction was hostile towards Mstislav, he made a family alliance with him, taking Mstislav’s daughter as his wife. After Mstislav Mstislavich had left Novgorod in 1215, the citizens asked Yaroslav to be their ruler, but instead Yaroslav chose to go to the city of

\textsuperscript{15} For the influence of some individual knyagina see for example: Пушкарёва Н. Л. Женщины древней Руси. М. 1989. See also: Beech G. Prosopography. P. 186.

\textsuperscript{16} Русские летописи. Т. 12. Лаврентьевская летопись. Рязань, 2001 (hereinafter – Лаврентьевская летопись). С. 388. The chronology of the Laurentian Chronicle is somewhat complicated because of the mixed use of the ul’tramartovskiy and matrovskiy styles. See: Бережков Н. К. Хронология русского летописания. М., 1963. С. 70. According to Berezhkov, the year 6698 (after the creation) falls in the time span of two years, corresponding with March 1189–February 1191 Anno Domini. Because this reference is the last to fall in sub anno 6698, it is probable that the year of Yaroslav’s birth is 1191.

\textsuperscript{17} Лаврентьевская летопись. С. 395. About the dating see: Бережков Н. К. Хронология русского летописания. С. 70.

\textsuperscript{18} «Того же лѣта, на зиму, великий князѧ Всеволодъ ожени сына свое-во Ярослава, и приведоша за ня Юрьевну Кончаковича» (Лаврентьевская летопись. С. 405), which corresponds to the winter 1206–1207.
Torzhok and blockade Novgorod’s grain supply. Because of the bad harvest, the city was starving. In this situation, the Chronicle relates, Yaroslav «had his knyagina, Mstislav’s daughter brought from Novgorod to him» 19. Mstislav’s wife was the daughter of Polovtsy Khan Kotyan, and it is possible that Yaroslav took their daughter as his new wife 20. According to Letopisets Pereyaslavlya Suzdal’skogo this union had already taken place in 1213/1214 21. The chronicles give no hint whatsoever, about what happened to Yaroslav’s first marriage to Yuri Konchakovitch’s daughter, nor do they tell whether there were any children from this marriage.

As Yaroslav’s first marriage just fades away from the sources, so too his second marriage presents problems to researchers, and it cannot be said for sure whether it lasted, as it certainly did not stop the father and son-in-law from coming into conflict. In 1215–2016 the new bride was in the crossfire between her father and her fiancé. The conflict divided not only Yaroslav and his father-in-law, but also Yarsolav’s brothers: his older brother, Konstantin, supported Mstislav, but the second-oldest Yuri, to whom his father Vsevolod had left the throne of Vladimir, was on the opposite side 22. The result was Yaroslav’s failure, and the Novgorod I Chronicle describes how the father eventually personally fetched his daughter away from Yaroslav’s court at Pereyaslavl and returned her to Novgorod 23. This event marks the final piece of

19 Новгородская первая летопись старшего и младшего изводов. М., 1950, year 6723, C. 253.
20 Катанчиев, Александр Невский…С. 3, 100.
22 Новгородская первая летопись. С. 54. Conflict, which developed between Yaroslav and Mstislav was considered demoralizing among the contemporaries. See: Новгородская первая летопись. С. 5; Лаврентьевская летопись. С. 418.
23 Новгородская первая летопись. С. 56.
information to be found in the chronicles in relation to Yaroslav’s marriages.

The identity of Yaroslav’s «most important» wife, the mother of his sons who later became prominent on the political scene of Vladimir-Suzdalia, was debated from the eighteenth century onwards. It became a fairly popular idea that the mother of the nine sons of Yaroslav’s in the chronicles was the daughter of the prince of Ryazan, Igor Glebovich. However popular this presumption was, there is no mention of this marriage in any of the Russian chronicles, which do not even state that Prince Igor Glebovich had any daughters.

On the other hand, the theory that Yaroslav’s marriage to the daughter of Mstislav Mstislavich endured after the family dispute, has gained wide popularity. One of the arguments in favour of Mstislav Mstislavich’s daughter has been the fact that she seems to have liked living in Novgorod, where the reign of her father was very popular. It is known that Yaroslav’s wife died there in 1244, and was buried beside her son Feodor. The Novgorod I Chronicle states: «In year 6752. The knyaginya of Yaroslav died, having been shorn (or taking the veil) in the monastery of St. George; and there she was laid by the side of her son Fedor, on May 4, the Day of St. Irina; her name was called Efrosinia».

The problem here is that we have several names to connect with Yaroslav’s «most important wife», but none of these reveal

---

24 See for example: Мальгин Т. Зерцало российских государей с 862 по 1789 год. СПб., 1789.
whose daughter she is. Recording her death in 1244, the Novgorod I Chronicle mentions the name of Yaroslav’s wife as Efrosinya. The Life of Aleksander Nevskiy, however, informs us that the name of his mother was Feodosiya. Apart from these Christian names, we also have the pagan dynastic name Rostilava, which was the name of Mstislav Mstislavich’s daughter, noted in the Letopisets Perejaslavlya Suzdal’skogo. All these three names have been connected, very readily, to one and the same person. Since the members of the princely families had both a Christian and a Slavic name, two names were commonplace among the Rurikid dynasty. With the suggestion that the third (Christian) name of Yaroslav’s wife was received after becoming a nun, we indeed have a situation where the idea of one long-lasting marriage can be entertained. In fact, the wording of the younger recension of the Novgorod I Chronicle hints more clearly the Efrosinya to really be her monastic name. Historians have unanimously emphasized that all the children of Yaroslav had the same mother.

The problem here is that the sources omit important details. We know names of the sons that he had, but we do not know if

---

27 For a thorough examination of the different theories concerning the identity of the mother of Alexander Nevskiy, see: Кучкин В. А. Александр Невский... С. 3–4, 25. On the death of the wife of Yaroslav, see: Новгородская первая летопись. С. 79.
28 «В лѣто 6752. Преставися княгиня Ярославляя, постригшися у святого Георгия в манасыри; ты же и положена бысть, сторонь сына своего Федора, маѣсяца маія въ 4, на память святых Ирины; наречено бысть имя ей Ефроснья». – Новгородская первая летопись. С. 79.
30 Летописец Переяславля Суздальскаго. С. 131.
31 Katanchiev for example recalls Mstislav Mstislavich’s daughter by the name Rostislava-Feodosiya, and combined the name Efrosinya with her monastic name. See: Katanchiev С. Т. Александр Невский... С. 79.
32 «В лѣто 6752. Преставися княгиня Ярославляя, у монастыря святого Георгия принявши мнишки чин; и аби ту положена бысть, посторонь сына своего Федора, маѣсяца маія въ 4, на память святых мученицы Ирины; и наречено бысть имя ей Ефроснья». – Новгородская первая летопись. С. 298.
33 See: Кучкин В. А. Александр Невский... С. 3–6.
these were the only ones. Moreover, the sources do not tell us who was the mother of each son. His first known son, Feodor, was born in 1219, three years after the above-mentioned family-dividing conflict. At that time Yaroslav was already 30 years old, and may have had children from earlier relationships. Yaroslav’s second son mentioned in the chronicles was Alexander, who later became the legendary war hero against the Swedes in the Battle of the Neva (1240), earning his nickname «Nevski» later in the 14th century. Traditionally the date of Alexander’s birth has been given as 1220, but V. A. Kuchkin has argued, that the date could also be 1221.

The Laurentian Chronicle names six sons of Yaroslav that survived the Mongol conquest: «Like Saul followed David, and God saved David from his hands, so too God saved these princes from the hands of the foreigners, namely pious and orthodox Yaroslav and his noble sons, who were six: Alexander, Andrey, Konstantin, Afanasiy, Daniil, and Michael».

The list is very much disputed. First of all, it lacks the name of Yaroslav Yaroslavich, the founder of the dynasty of Tver. This obvious «mistake» in the list has been explained in two ways: either the Tverian prince was purposely forgotten, possibly censored later because of the rivalry of later Moscow and Tver dynasties; or it is possible that he was indeed included on the list, if the name Afanasiy could be regarded as his Christian name in place of his dynastic princely name Yaroslav. A later list of Yaroslav’s sons in the 16th century Book of Degrees (Stepennaya kniga) contains in total the names of nine sons of Yaroslav. It describes how in the last moments of his life, after feeling very sick on his return from Karakorum, Prince Yaroslav wanted to give his last blessing to his children. This passage

---


35 Кучкин В. А. 1) О дате рождения … С. 174–176; 2) Александр Невский… С. 3–6.

36 «… якоже и Саулъ гоняше Давыда; но Богъ избави отъ руку его; та-ко и сихъ Богъ избави отъ руки князя Ярослава с благородными своими сыны; бѣ же ихъ 6: Олексадръ, Андрѣй, Кострантинъ, Офонасій, Данило, Михайло…». – Лаврентьевская летопись. С. 446.
reports, that six of Yaroslav’s sons were then alive, namely «brave and wise Alexander, successful Andrey, valiant Konstantin, Yaroslav, sweet Daniil, and good Michael»37. Yaroslav also remembered his daughters Evdokia and Ulyana, and the sons who had died before him, namely Feodor, Afanasiy and Vasili38.

There are also other problems concerning the information about Prince Yaroslav’s sons. Namely, when the army of Mongol khan Batu invaded Vladimir-Suzdalia during the winter of 1238, the Novgorod I Chronicle narrates, that during the attack on Tver, one of the victims who died in the defence of the city was a son of Yaroslav39. The chronicle does not give us the name of the son, but if the son really participated in the actual defence, we could speculate that he must have been of a proper age, and thus possibly older than Yaroslav’s oldest known living son, Alexander (who was around seventeen at that time), whose elder brother Feodor had already died in Novgorod in 1233.

Therefore, according to a relatively late source, Book of Degrees (Stepennaya kniga), Yaroslav has a total of nine identified sons. However, because Feodor had already died in 1233, Afanasiy survived the Mongol conquest, and Vasili was born only in 1241, it appears that the son who died during the storming of Tver, is not included in this list at all. Therefore one must conclude that there were children that the chronicles fail to mention. Maybe they were the descendants from Yaroslav’s first marriage, maybe illegitimate children; the question remains unanswered.

In this network of family alliances and power politics, Yaroslav inherited the throne of Vladimir after his brother’s death at the hands of the Mongols in 1238. Yaroslav was the first among the Russian princes who travelled to Saray, the newly established head court of Batu Khan, to acknowledge his submission. Batu installed him on the Kievan throne, while his son Konstantin was dispatched

38 Там же. С. 255.
39 Новгородская первая летопись. С. 76.
to continue his journey all the way to Karakorum, to the head court of the Mongol Empire. Konstantin did not return home until 1245, after which his father Yaroslav embarked on a new trip to Batu’s court Saray, accompanied by his brothers Ivan and Svyatoslav. Batu sent the younger brothers back home, while Yaroslav was ordered to witness the elections of the next great khan in Karakorum. During his stay there Yaroslav was poisoned, a victim of the tactics of the new Great Khan Guyuk and his mother, and died on the September 30th, 1246.

The notices of Yaroslav’s death in the contemporary sources are very sparse. The Laurentian Chronicle merely states: «During that autumn died Yaroslav, Vsevolod’s son, while staying with foreigners, as he was making his way back home on September 30th, on the day of St Grigoriy»⁴¹. The Novgorod I Chronicle does not mention his death at all in its older redaction. The Book of Degrees, on the other hand, makes an elaborate statement: «Like the Holy Scriptures state: “Can anyone do more than give his life for others!” For this memorable great prince Yaroslav gave his life in the faraway lands in the khan’s horde for the holy churches and Christianity and for all the people of the Russian lands»⁴². The theories of the Laurentian Chronicle and the Book of Degrees both reflect the spirit of age in which they were written. While contemporary chronicles are sparse and laconic, the sixteenth-century source aimed at solemn and tragic description of the faith of the leader who was killed while serving his country.

⁴⁰ Насонов А. Н. Монголы и Русь (История татарской политики на Руси). М., 1940. С. 27–32.
⁴¹ «Тое же осени Ярославъ князь, сынъ Всеволожь, преставися во иноплеменницѣхъ, ида отъ Кановичь, мѣсяца семтября 30, на память святаго Григорья». – Лаврентьевская летопись. С. 448.
⁴² «“Чьто убо сего больше”, – яко же Святое Писанiе глаголеть, – “еже положити душу свою за други своя?” И тако сій приснопамятный великий князь Ярославъ въ дальней земли, въ Кановѣ Ордѣ положи душу свою за святыя домы церковныя и за вѣру христiянскую и за вся люди земли Рускiя». – Книга степенная царского родословия. С. 255.
Account of John of Plano Carpini

John of Plano Carpini’s account of the individuals he encountered during his trip to Mongolia in his History of the Mongols reveals a world very different from that presented so briefly by the chroniclers. First of all, Carpini confirms that the prestige of Prince Yaroslav was high in Guyuk’s camp, for he states that he, a pope’s legate and Prince Yaroslav were the two most respected guests among the four thousand envoys and ambassadors who had gathered in Karakorum. As Carpini hoped to convince his readers of the veracity of his accounts, he mentions several persons by name who can confirm his story. In these few lines Carpini gives us a glimpse of the people that were around Prince Yaroslav as his closest companions on his last journey. In this list, he mentions the warriors in Yaroslav’s retinue:

In Batu’s camp we met the son of Prince Yaroslav. He was accompanied by a soldier from Russia called Sangor, who was Cuman from his origins. Now he is a Christian, likewise as another Russian from the Suzdal district, who acted as an interpreter at Batu’s court. At the court of the emperor of the Tartars we met Prince Yaroslav, who died there, and his soldier called Temer. Temer was our interpreter in the court of Khan Guyuk — that is the emperor of the Tartars — when we translated the emperor’s letter to the pope, and also when we spoke and answered.

44 «Apud Bati invenimus filium ducis Ierozlai, qui habebat secum militem unum de Ruscia qui vocatur Sangor, qui fuit natione comanus sed nunc est christianus, ut alter rutenus qui apud Bati noster fuit interpres, de terra susdaliensi. Apud imperatorum Tartarorum invenimus ducem Ierozlauum qui mortus est ibidem, et militem sum qui vocatur Temer, qui fuit interpres noster apud Cuycccan, imperatorem scilicet Tartarorum, tam in translatione litterarum imperatoris ad dominum papam, quam in verbis dicendis et respondendis». – John of Plano Carpini, Istoria Mongalorum. 9:4. P. 331.
Carpini does not refer to Temer’s origin. However, Temer’s original Turkic name, which means «Iron», hints at his Turkic-speaking, nomadic origins. Temer must have held a prominent position in Yaroslav’s retinue. Carpini mentions him several times, understandably, since Carpini was dependent on his help in translating to the Mongol tongue.\(^45\)

Pope Innocent IV also mentioned Yaroslav in his letter to Yaroslav’s son, Alexander, in January 1248. Carpini must have given the pope a thorough account of his long journey after he returned in late 1247. In his letter, Innocent seeks to convince Alexander, the new authority on the throne of Novgorod and Vladimir-Suzdal, that his father Yaroslav had been converted – or «returned», as the rhetoric puts it – to the Catholic faith on his death bed. According to the pope, this conversion was the result of «a certain military advisor, Jemer, who was obedient to him»\(^46\).

The Pope’s urgent task was to try to unite the Orthodox Christians under papacy in order to attack the schismatic emperor Frederick II, and to prevent the Mongol onslaught that seemed to threaten Europe. I do not want to speculate about whether or not the pope’s story on Yaroslav’s conversion was accurate, but it surely suggests that there were influential people among Yaroslav’s retinue who were never mentioned in the chronicles. Carpini also mentions, besides the warrior Temer, that two other partic-

\(^{45}\) *John of Plano Carpini*. Istoria Mongalorum. 9:40. P. 325.

\(^{46}\) «…de conscientia Jemeris militis consiliarii sui obediente». The part reads in complete as follows: «Pater futuri saeculi, princeps pacis, seminator casti consilii, Redemptor noster Dominus Iesus Christus menti clare memorie Jaroslai progenitoris tui rorem sue benecionis infundit, ac eidem inextimabilem sue notite gratiam admirabilia concedens viam sibi preparavit in heremo, per quam ipse fuit ad ovile reductus dominicum, velut ovis, que longo tempore aberraverat per desertum, quia sicut dilecto filio fratre Johanne de Plano Carpino de Ordine Fratrum Minorum, Protonotario nostro ad gentem Tataricam destinato referente dedicimus, idem, pater tuus novum hominem affectans induere, de conscientia Jemeris militis consiliarii sui obediente Romane ecclesie matris sue ineiusdem fratrismanibus devote, ac humiliter se devovit, quod quidem confestim clariusset hominibus, nisi tam subito, tamquam faciliter mortis eventus eum de medio subdixisset». – *Historica Russiae Monumenta* / Ed. A. J. Turgenev. Saint Petersburg, 1841. Vol. 1. P. 63.
pants of the Suzdalian retinues had Cuman origin. It is also interesting, that they were all converted to Christianity, which hints that those men had prominent places in princely retinues.

The Mongol onslaught drove the Polovtsy to seek alliances. The Polovtsy were in close contact with both Russian and Hungarian elite in order to find support to suppress the Mongols that were threatening their freedom and hegemony in the Steppe. As the Mongol Empire expanded, part of the Polovtsy submitted to the new rule and acknowledged the Mongols as their new overlords; the other part fled. Some of the Polovtsy already became Christians at the beginning of the 12th century, when King David II of Georgia married the daughter of Khan Otrok. Friars of the Dominican Order commenced an evangelising mission among the Polovtsy, and in 1227 Bortz Khan decided to have himself and his people baptized, when offering his allegiance to the Hungarian king. The bishop of Esztergom, Robert, baptized Polovtsy in a mass baptism in Moldavia in 1227. Under the leadership of Khan Kotyan (Kuthen/Köten) around 40,000 Polovtsy made their way to Hungary after 1239, following their last desperate fight against the Mongols.

Both Carpini and William of Rubruck testified that the Mongol court was a meeting place of people from various places. Besides Hungarians and Russians, there were also people of western European origin, probably captured by the Mongols from Hungary and Balkans in 1241–1242. Carpini states:

---

At the court of the emperor we met with people who had arrived with other Tartar nobles: there were many Russians and Hungarians who could speak Latin and French. There were Russian priests and others. Some of these had been with the Tartars thirty years in the military campaigns as well as in other situations. They were well aware of all their matters, because they knew their language and had been living with them regularly: some had been living with them for twenty years; others less than ten years, and others over ten years. From them we could learn all matters thoroughly.48

Obviously then, various forms of contacts were formed in the Steppe, but in the terms of this article, it is interesting to observe the role of the Polovtsys in this context. The Polovtsys population, dwelling in the vast steppe area reaching from Asia to the Hungarian plains, was skilled in international relations, truly flexible when trying to secure their own traditional ways of living, and therefore developed as skilful intermediates in the contact networks of the vast steppe area. They were especially valued as interpreters, as the Polovtsy language had become a form of lingua franca of the steppes. This is also strongly evidenced by Carpini’s Historia Mongalorum and the Pope’s letter to Alexander. The Polovtsy language has scarcely survived in written form. There is only a single piece of evidence of their written language, a manuscript called Codex Cumanicus, which is a kind of Cuman-Latin dictionary from the end of the 13th century.49

All in all, the wide range of Polovtsy tactics in their dealings with the Mongols, assured them a certain status of intermediates among the large and ethnically diverse population. As the steppe people were of mixed Turkic, Iranian and now Mongolian ele-

ments, it was clear that a common language was needed. Since the Polovtsy had long established control in the trade of the Black Sea, and Crimean ports, it was natural that their language became the language of the traders. And this remained even after the Mongol conquest, as the Mongol tribes who moved to the pasture lands of the Polovtsy adopted many of their habits, and gradually became assimilated.

Carpini’s History describes the high-ranking Polovtsy military servants in the retinues of the Russian princes. It is apparent that they were part of the retinues of Vladimir-Suzdal princes at that time. The pattern is testified also by the Life of Alexander Nevskiy, which explains that in the famous Battle of the Neva, there was also a Polovtsy warrior among his closest *druzhina*.

In general, however, the most neglected information of Carpini’s History, is an account of an event which took place when he was returning back home from Karakorum. During his return Carpini met a messenger called Coligneus, who was appointed to travel to Yaroslav by orders of Yaroslav’s wife and Batu khan:

When we returned to the land of Bisermin, at the town of Yani-kint we met Coligneus, who was on his way to meet the above-mentioned Yaroslav by the orders of his wife and Batu. Also, we met Cocceleban and his retinue. They have all now returned to the land of Suzdal in Russia, and the truth can be learned from them if necessary.

---

50 The Life lists the brave men fighting in the ranks of Alexander Nevskiy: «And the third man was Yakov, a Polovets, who was one of the prince’s hunters. He fought against the enemy with his sword, and the prince was pleased with him» («3-и — Яковъ, родомъ полочанинъ, ловчий бѣ у князя. Се наѣха на полкъ с мечемъ, и похвали его князь». – Повести о житии… С. 190).

51 About the spelling of the names in different manuscripts of Carpini’s Istoria see: Горский А. А. Свидетели путешествия Плано Карпини: Уникальная информация и ошибки прочтения // Древняя Русь. Вопросы медievистики. 2014. № 3 (57). С. 115–120.

This reference is interesting in many ways. It not only states that Yaroslav was remarried, but also refers to the close contact of Yaroslav’s wife and Batu khan. This remark brings us to the question of the identity of Yaroslav’s wife. As mentioned previously, the *Novgorod I Chronicle* informs us that Yaroslav’s wife had died in Novgorod in 1244. If this date is accurate, Yaroslav was supposed to spend a year as a widow before remarrying. When Yaroslav met Friar John in Karakorum in September 1246, two years had already passed. However, there is other information that leads us to ponder whether the *Novgorod Chronicle* information is accurate. First of all, the inscription on the tomb of Yaroslav’s wife in the Monastery of St George shows that she had already died three years earlier, in 1241.

Therefore, it is interesting to consider the identity of this woman, whom Carpini called Yaroslav’s wife. The issue is clouded further by the apparently close relationship between the wife and Batu, since they seem, according to Carpini’s note, to have sent a mutual message to Yaroslav. This message was sent «by the orders of his wife and Batu».

It thus seems that Yaroslav had remarried and his new wife was actively involved with the diplomatic negotiations, including making contact with the Mongols. Her active involvement in the issues of the day was apparent, which is also something that the chronicle sources neglect, since they relate only information about extraordinary events, rather than everyday occurrences, remarking only on the most important family feasts of the princely family, wars and the long travels of the princes.

---

53 Новгородская первая летопись. С. 79.
54 Катанчиев С. Т. Александр Невский… С. 101–102. The death date and the burial place of knyaginya Feodosiya is very unclear. It is also argued that she was buried in St. George Monastery of Vladimir. Furthermore, most of the web-sites of St. George Monastery of Novgorod inform that Feodosiya died already in 1224.
Conclusions

What then, can we say about the closest circle of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich? Certainly that there were many more people involved in his life than the sources can ever suggest. But that is not a novel observation. At the beginning of this article I outlined a key difficulty in this kind of survey: the sources can reveal only a very small portion of all his personal relationships.

Although very little is known about family and marriage customs in medieval Russian lands, we know from other studies concerning medieval power politics, that the family relations were the most important ways of acquiring high positions in society and ruling hierarchies\(^55\). For example, a number of recent studies of Carolingian kings and their followers have demonstrated that a large percentage of the men holding the highest offices were also attached to the royal family by strong personal bonds or marriage\(^56\). The account of John of Plano Carpini in his *History of the Mongols* reveals that in the princely retinue of the early 13\(^{th}\) century, important positions were held by the members of the Polovtsy tribe. The relationship between the Russian princes and the Polovtsy aristocracy during the first half of the 13\(^{th}\) century has been largely neglected in historical studies, partly because of the problems presented by the sparse source material. This article argues, however, that intermarriages and close family ties between Rus’—Polovtsy aristocracy were a part of everyday life the princely house of Vladimir-Suzdalia. As a result, it is possible that Prince Yaroslav’s last wife mentioned in Carpini’s account could have been of Polovtsy origin.

Автор: Мари Исоахо, доктор философии, исследователь-постдокторант Финской академии наук, сотрудник кафедры философии, истории, культуры и искусств гуманитарного факультета Хельсинкского университета (адрес: P. O. Box 59, FI-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland). mari.isoaho@helsinki.fi

Заголовок: Polovtsy contacts in the house of Vladimir-Suzdalia – John of Plano Carpini’s Account of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich’s retinue in 1246 [Контакты с половцами во Владимиро-Суздальском княжестве – на основании описания Джованни Плано Карпини поведения свиты князя Ярослава Всеволодовича в 1246 году].

Литература и источники, использованные в статье
Бережков Н. Г. Хронология русского летописания. М., 1963. 376 с.
Горский А. А. Свидетели путешествия Плано Карпини: Уникальная информация и ошибки прочтения // Древняя Русь. Вопросы медиевистики. 2014. № 3 (57). С. 115–120.


Мальгин Т. Зерцало российских государств с 862 по 1789 год. СПб, 1789, 111 с.
Назаренко А. В. Древняя Русь и славяне (Древнейшие государства Восточной Европы). М., 2009. 528 с.
Насонов А. Н. Монголы и Русь (История татарской политики на Руси). М., 1940. 178 с.
Нестеренко А. Н. Ярослав Всеволодович // Вопросы истории. 2014. № 11. С. 31–47.

Новгородская летопись старшего и младшего изводов. М., 1950. 640 с.
Пересняков А. Е. Княжеское право в Древней Руси. Очерки по истории X – XII столетий. Лекции по русской истории. Киевская Русь. М. 1993. 635 с.
Пушкарева Н. Л. Женщины древней Руси. М., 1989. 286 с.


Information about the article

Author: Mari Isoaho, Ph.D. – Postdoctoral researcher of the Finnish Academy, working in the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Arts, at the Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies (P. O. Box 59, FI-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland). mari.isoaho@helsinki.fi

Title: Polovtsy contacts in the house of Vladimir-Suzdalia – John of Plano Carpini’s Account of Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich’s retinue in 1246

Summary: This article contends that intermarriage customs between Rus’ aristocracy and Polovtsy khans’ daughters had established firm ties for the Polovtsy warriors in the princely courts and retinues. Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich’s (1191–1246) first bride was a daughter of the notorious Polovtsy khan Yuri Konchakovich. His second known marriage took place around 1213–1215 with the daughter of Mstislav Mstislavich Udaloy, and the mother of the bride was most probably of Polovtsy origin. The notion of the high position of the Polovtsy in the princely retinue is further strengthened by John of Plano Carpini’s account in his History of the Mongols, where he gives interesting information about the closest circle of Prince Yaroslav in his last trip to Karakorum in 1246. Carpini’s account
suggests that Prince Yaroslav was remarried again in 1244. Furthermore, it is clear from Carpini’s testimony, that the new wife had close ties with the Steppe diplomacy, indicating a high probability that she was of Polovtsy origin.

**Keywords:** Yaroslav Vsevolodovich, Polovtsy, Mongols, John Plano di Carpini, medieval family relations

**References (transliteration)**


Nasonov A. N. Mongoly i Rus’ (Istoriya tatarskoy politiki na Rusi) [Mongols and Rus’ (History of Tatar politics in Rus’)]. Moscow, 1940. 178 p. (In Russian).


Petrukhin V. Ya., Raevskiy D. S. Ocherki istorii narodov Rossi v drevnosti i rannem srednevekov’e. [Historical features of the nations of Russia in the ancient and early medieval time]. Moscow, 1998. 386 p. (In Russian).


