



This mid-fifteenth-century icon shows the battle between Novgorod and Vladimir-Suzdal in 1169. During this siege (lower register), the city of Novgorod was miraculously protected by holy icons and relics (middle register), which led to their subsequent intense veneration as protectors of the city (top register).

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EXPANSIVE & WELL-CONNECTED

By Christian Raffensperger

THE MEDIEVAL KINGDOM OF KYIVAN RUS

The foundation of the kingdom of Rus is wrapped up in what historians like to call mythohistory. We have a great deal of information accumulated from archaeological investigations that points to a long-established connection with Scandinavia. We know that Scandinavian traders plied the eastern European river systems looking for amber, furs, slaves, and eventually silver to take back to Baltic and North Sea markets. The silver came from the Abbasid Caliphate and passed up the Volga to the Bulgars and elsewhere, thus drawing the Scandinavians – called Varangians in the sources – down those river pathways.

Despite these early connections, the story of the founding of Rus is one written centuries after the fact as a way to aggrandize the then ruling family. The story is centred on the claim that the local tribes, living along the eastern European waterways, kicked out the Scandinavians who were taking tribute from them. But they were unable to rule themselves – “tribe rose against tribe” – thus they issued an invitation: “Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us.” These new rulers were Scandinavians, a group called the Rus.

The name Rus most likely comes via a Finnish word for ‘rowers’ (*ruotsi*), which was

transmitted into Slavic as ‘Rusi’ and eventually to Rus (Русь). Thus, in this mythohistorical narrative, Riurik became the first ruler of Rus and the ancestor of the ruling family – a ruling family who were not conquerors but were invited in to rule over a population who could not rule themselves.

Oleg, a successor to Riurik, is credited with the actual creation of the kingdom of Rus as he expanded south from the Novgorod region to take the city of Kyiv, uniting what would become the two main poles of Rus. The Islamic silver was drying up at this time, and Oleg became more interested in the Dnieper River route to the Black Sea and to the Byzantine Empire. In the early tenth century, he

Kyiv not Kiev

Most readers will have learned the capital of Ukraine as Kiev (pronounced Kee-ev). However, the Ukrainian spelling of Kyiv (pronounced Kevv) is becoming much more common. The spelling Kiev is a holdover from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and the Ukrainian government has used Kyiv since 1995. In 2012, the United Nations agreed to adopt Kyiv as the standard form for the name of the city. Since the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, it has gained increasing

worldwide acceptance, especially in the last few months since the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Kyiv is not the only name to reflect the differences between Russia and Ukraine. The Christianizer of Rus is known as Vladimir (like Putin) in Russia and Volodymyr (like Zelensky) in Ukraine. These linguistic changes are not modern affectations but reflect the split between the Russian and Ukrainian languages that happened many centuries ago.



A sickle and plowshare from the ninth or tenth century, discovered in the Kursk region of Kyivan Rus.

© The State Historical Museum, Moscow

This double-sided gold pendant, dating to eleventh-century Kyiv, shows Saint Michael on one side and a medusa-like figure on the other. This object likely functioned as an amulet to ward off evil.

© Shakko / Wikimedia Commons





An eleventh-century relief of two military saints on horseback — possibly Nestor and Demetrius — from the façade of the cathedral of Saint Michael in Kyiv.

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A ceremonial bracelet for the upper part of the arm showing the resurrection of Christ, now preserved in the Louvre Museum. This champlevé enamel on gilded copper object dates to ca. 1170 and comes from the tomb of Andrei I Bogoliubski of Vladimir-Suzdal (r. 1157–1174), who besieged Novgorod in 1169, as illustrated in the opening icon for this article.

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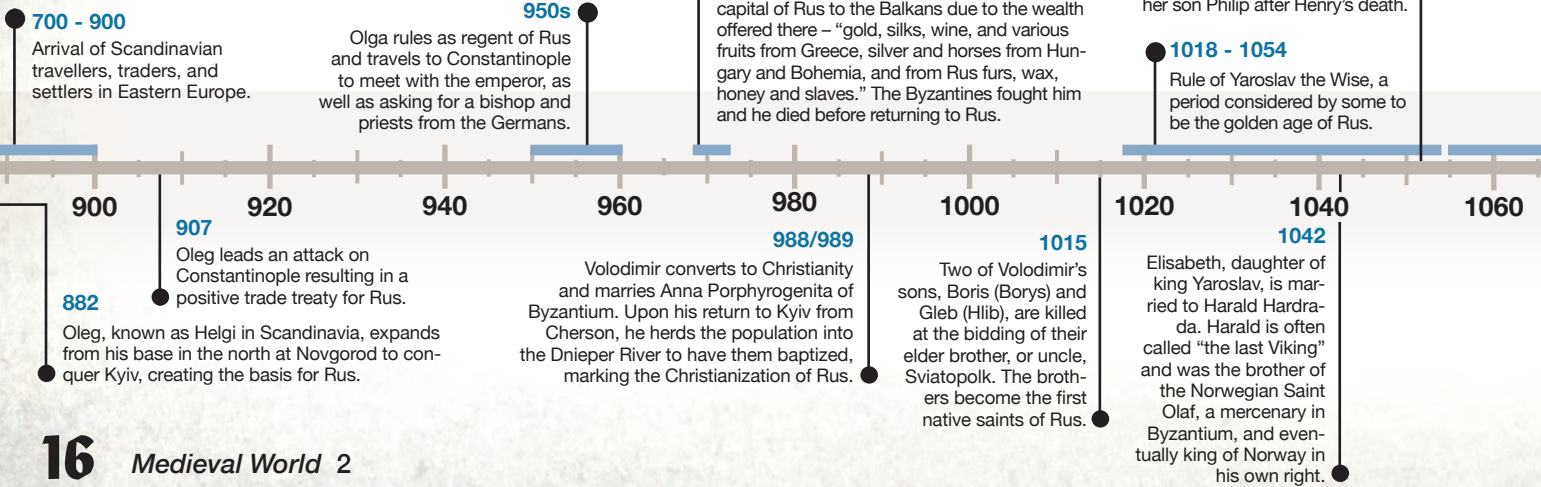
even led a successful assault on Constantinople. This assault, which according to the Russian sources led to the Byzantines considering Oleg to be an incarnation of Saint Demetrius because of his wisdom, resulted in a formal peace treaty and trade agreement between the two sides, one of the first formal entries of the Rus into wider sources.

Oleg's own successor, Igor, was much less successful in this regard, as when he raided Constantinople, he lost. Though we have a treaty resulting from that campaign as well, it has clearly shifted to favour the Byzantines instead of the Russians. Igor's treaty does provide fascinating information about Rus, such as merchants requiring a seal from the ruler to travel to Constantinople, as well as the presence of Christians within Rus. Igor's death in 945 led to the rule of his wife Olga, as regent for their minor son Sviatoslav, who himself later tried to shift the capital to the Danube River – an attempt that ultimately cost his life.

Conversion

Olga was very interested in Christianity and even had a priest, Gregory, in her entourage. With him and numerous merchants, she travelled to Constantinople and met with the Byzantine emperor and his wife, eating with them and receiving a great many gifts. It is also possible that she received baptism there, though the Byzantine sources, which do record the visit, do not mention the baptism at all.

The Russian source, a much later one from the early twelfth century, does mention her baptism, however, and records that she used her famous wiles (she was known as a 'wise woman') to outsmart the emperor. With that same cleverness, after returning home from Constantinople, she asked the German emperor, Otto I (r. 936–973), for a bishop and priests to Christianize her realm, and Otto duly sent them. Olga, aware of the political and religious importance of conversion, was attempting to pit both neighbouring empires against one another.



However, it was not under Olga that Rus converted to Christianity. This occurred under her grandson, a few decades later. There are multiple stories recorded in the Russian sources for Volodimir's conversion. They are all run together as if the chronicler did not know which to privilege and thus accepted them all.

In the first, Volodimir calls together representatives of Judaism, Islam, and both Latin and Greek Christianity to quiz them on their religions. His famous quip that he cannot convert to Islam because "drink is the joy of the Russians" comes from this account. After eliminating Judaism, the second story sees messengers sent to the various places of worship, and in Constantinople, the Russians "knew not whether they were on earth or in heaven" when they entered Hagia Sophia. A third story includes Volodimir's blinding and the taking of the Byzantine Black Sea city of Cherson.

All of these stories, when bundled together with other sources, lead to the modern scholarly narrative of the conversion. In that version, Volodimir provides military support to the Byzantine emperor Basil II (r. 976–1025), who faced internal revolts. In exchange, Volodimir demanded the hand of Basil's sister, Anna Porphyrogenita, who had been courted by both German and French rulers.

Basil agreed to Volodimir's terms, with the stipulation that he convert to Christianity. To get his bride, Volodimir ended up having to take Cherson hostage, but eventually the two were married in that city and Volodimir converted. Upon their return to Kyiv, he ushered the population into the Dnieper and priests from Cherson, as well as those with Anna, pronounced them baptized. Thus was the kingdom of Rus Christianized; the erection of churches and education of the masses began from that point onward.

Marriages throughout Europe

The marriage of Volodimir and Anna Porphyrogenita was the first, but certainly not the last of the major royal marriages of the Russian royal family and other elites from throughout Europe. For the next hundred years, the members of the ruling family almost always found marriage with foreign royal partners, and it is only really in the twelfth century that marriages within Rus begin to occur with more frequency.

It is among the grandchildren of Volodimir – the children of Yaroslav the Wise and his wife Ingigerd, princess of Sweden – that we see some particular highlights of these dynastic marriages. Their daughter Anna married Henry I, the king of France, in the middle of the eleventh century. This process involved French bishops traveling to Rus to negotiate the terms of the marriage, and her eventual procession and entry into Paris. Anna gave birth to the heir to the French throne, Philip, as well as introduced that name into France. She also became regent for Philip after Henry's death, and she even signed documents in Cyrillic script but using the Latin language – "Anna Regina" – Queen Anna.

Anna's sister Elisabeth also made a high-profile marriage. She married Harald Hardrada (r. 1046–1066), often called the last Viking. In 1030, after the Battle of Stiklestad at which his brother Olaf, later Saint Olaf, died, Harald fled to Rus and became part of the household of Yaroslav and Ingigerd, where he met Elisabeth. With no money or reputation, he left Rus to go to Byzantium, where he served in the Varangian Guard and campaigned in the Balkans and throughout the Mediterranean.



A twelfth-century small icon of the Virgin Mary with her hands raised in an intercessory role. Such gilded silver portable icons were used in private devotion across the Eastern Christian cultural spheres throughout the Middle Ages.

© The Walters Art Museum

This is a facsimile of the so-called Kyiv Missal, one of the oldest Church Slavonic manuscripts dating to the tenth century and written in Glagolitic script. The original is preserved in the Library of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Kyiv, DA / P 328.

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1054 - 1087

The period of king Iziaslav's rule in Rus, during which he is expelled twice, travelling with his wife and at least one son to Poland and the German Empire, while his son Iaropolk goes to meet with Pope Gregory VII in Rome.

1125

King Mstislav begins his rule in Kyiv. He was also called Harald in Scandinavian sources due to his mother's influence. She was Gytha, daughter of Harold Godwinson, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England.

1150s and 1160s

Yaroslav Osmomysl (the eight-minded) ruled Galicia and became an important power-broker both in the south-west of Rus and for control of Kyiv in the Dnieper valley.

1210s and 1220s

Battles for control over Galicia between Mstislav Mstislavich, Daniil Romanovich, Coloman of Hungary, and Leszek the White of Poland.

1240s

The Mongol World Empire comes to include most of Rus.

1242

Alexander Nevsky defeats the German crusaders at the famous 'Battle on the Ice'.

1238

The Mongols conquer the Russian city of Riazan. This marks the beginning of the Mongol conquest of Rus.

1080

1100

1120

1140

1160

1180

1200

1220

1240

1089

Evpraksia, daughter of king Vsevolod, is married to Emperor Henry IV of the German Empire. She will play a major role in the Investiture Controversy.

1146

The death of king Vsevolod Olgovich. This is a date some have used to end the unity of Kyivan Rus.

1204

The Fourth Crusade sacks Constantinople. This creates a ripple effect throughout the Orthodox world.

1222

Orthodox churches are closed in the Baltic, enhancing the split between Latin and Orthodox Christianity.

1240

Alexander Nevsky fights Swedish crusaders and gains his nickname. Kyiv is sacked by the Mongols. This is a popular date for the end of Kyivan Rus.



A gold temple pendant, or *kolti*, with two sirens, dating to the turn of the twelfth century. Such cloisonné enamel objects adorned head-dresses, especially those of women, in Byzantium and Rus.

© Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, DC

This icon of the Saints Boris and Gleb on horseback dates to ca. 1377 and hails from the church dedicated to the two Russian saints in Plotniki, Novgorod. The main figures and the setting are painted with tempera on wood, while the background is covered in a silver revetment.

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Heyday of Kyivan Rus

In the eleventh century, Rus was the largest kingdom, by territory, in all of medieval Europe. It stretched from the Baltic Sea in the north, near which was the famous trading entrepot of Novgorod, to the Black Sea in the south. Along the way, one travelled to major cities such as Smolensk, Chernihiv, and finally Kyiv on the Dnieper River. In the east, the kingdom reached to the Oka River, a tributary of the Volga, where, in the twelfth century, Yuri Dolgoruky (Long-arm)

Eventually, he returned to Rus, married Elisabeth, and went back to Scandinavia, where he took his place as king of Norway. Harald died in 1066, that momentous year, while invading England. He was defeated by Harold Godwinson, who later that summer lost his life and his kingdom to William the Bastard of Normandy.

In an interesting connection, Harold Godwinson's daughter, Gytha, ended up in Rus after her father's death and married the Russian prince Volodimir Monomakh (r. 1113–1125), who would eventually become king of Rus. Their son, Mstislav, was called 'Harald' in Scandinavian sources as a tribute to his maternal grandfather, Harold Godwinson. Mstislav/Harald and the Swedish princess he married, Christina, also married their children into European royalty. Two of their daughters, Malmfrid and Ingeborg, married into the Norwegian and Danish ruling houses, respectively. Their marital lives were as intertwined as their natal lives, as they helped one another through the deaths of their spouses, and to gain advantages for their children, particularly for Ingeborg's son Valdemar – a Latin version of her own grandfather's name, Volodimir – who would eventually become king of Denmark.

The marriages discussed here are but the tip of the iceberg. The Russian women who travelled abroad through these marriages took their language, culture, and home lives with them, including a loyalty to their natal family, making them not only brides but ambassadors for the kingdom of Rus.

and his son Andrei Bogolyubsky (God-Lover) created a new power centre in Vladimir-Suzdal. In the west, Rus bordered Hungary and Poland, with a major seat at Volodymyr in Volhynia, the home to the Iziaslavich family of the ruling clan who had, understandably, the closest ties with the rest of Europe.

Kyiv was indisputably the capital of the polity, and the ruler of Kyiv, despite bearing the same title as the other rulers, was the first among equals and considered to be the pater familias of the clan. A German chronicler of the early eleventh century noted that Kyiv was "the centre of that kingdom" where "there are more than four hundred churches, eight markets, and an unknown number of inhabitants." It is probable that Thietmar of Merseburg exaggerates, but he did have informants who had been in Kyiv.

Kyiv was undeniably grand for the period. It was erected on a series of hills jutting above the Dnieper River, with fortifications erected around the tops of the hills, and with gates allowing admittance from each of the main trading directions. There was the Golden Gate, which had a chapel above the gate itself, and which managed trade to the south, and the Jewish Gate, which faced to the west and the road that went to Hungary.

The Podol Gate faced the river and the long road to the riverbank down which one found the podol, or marketplace, itself – a sprawling wooden encampment of houses, each with its own courtyard, and a thriving marketplace where everything was sold and much was made, including jewellery, leather goods, and glass goods. Kyiv was the centre of not just north–south trade on the Dnieper, but east–west trade as well, with connections to the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Two of the most important ecclesiastical sites of Rus were also in Kyiv. One was the church of Saint Sophia – like the Golden Gate, this was an appropriation from Constantinople, a way to bring a slice of the famous Hagia Sophia to the Dnieper. Similar churches dedicated to holy wisdom were built elsewhere, such as in Novgorod in the north.

The other main ecclesiastical site in Kyiv, or just outside, was the Kyivan Caves Monastery. This monastery was literally built around a system of caves dug out of the earth. Originally

A bronze amulet pendant from Novgorod, dated to the eleventh or twelfth century.

© Cherdyn Museum of the History of Faith



KYIVAN RUS, CA. 12TH - 13TH CENTURY

LEGEND



TERRITORY INCORPORATED WITHIN KYIVAN RUS (INTERNAL DIVISIONS IDENTIFIED)



PROMINENT MONUMENT



PROMINENT BATTLE / SIEGE / SACKING



PRESENT-DAY NATIONAL BORDERS



FORMER CHURCH OF HOLY WISDOM, NOW HAGIA SOPHIA GRAND MOSQUE, ISTANBUL

HISTORIC EMPIRE OF TREBIZOND



The opening illumination for the Gospel of Luke in the Ostromir Gospels. This is the oldest dated East Slavic manuscript, created for Ostromir of Novgorod ca. 1056.

© The National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg

founded by hermit monks, these underground cells were connected, and aboveground structures were built during this period. These structures included massive stone churches and walls to enclose the monastery, turning it into a communal monastic establishment with a rule, or governing charter, brought from Byzantium. The monks of the Kyivan Caves monastery were the holiest monks in Rus and were often chosen to be bishops throughout the kingdom, as well as advisors to the king.

One of the most maligned rulers of this golden age was Yaroslav and Ingigerd's son Iziaslav. He was expelled twice from the rule of Kyiv, and twice he ventured elsewhere in Europe to find support. After his first expulsion, by the people of Kyiv, he found support with his wife's kinsman, Bolesław II of Poland, who helped him return to the Kyivan throne.

A few years later, however, Iziaslav's own brothers usurped his throne and forced him to flee. This time, Iziaslav was more prepared, and he fled with his wife, his son, and the Kyivan treasury. Unfortunately for Iziaslav, Bolesław II was less willing to help – though he did help himself to the treasury – and expelled Iziaslav and his family from Poland. Iziaslav and Gertrude, his wife, made their way to her maternal relatives in the German Empire, where they arranged a meeting with Emperor Henry IV.

Meanwhile, they sent their son Yaropolk, with his German wife Cunigunda, to see Pope Gregory VII. Playing both sides of the Investiture Controversy (see side panel) against one another was a clever move and it resulted in both offering help, though it was the help of Pope Gregory that was more useful and resulted in Bolesław II changing his tune, returning the treasury, and helping, once again, to return Iziaslav to the throne of Kyiv.

Evpraksia

In 1089, Evpraksia, “the daughter of the king of Rus,” married Henry IV, the emperor of the German Empire. This was not their first marriage, but Evpraksia was still a young woman and this was a tremendous marker of her importance in European politics.

Evpraksia's marriage had been arranged by her father, King Vsevolod, and Henry IV. The purpose of the marriage was multiple, but one rationale for the union was to attempt to tie Rus and the German Empire closer together to give Henry's new ecclesiastical plan leverage.

Henry IV at the time was involved with the Investiture Controversy: a fight between him and the papacy over the right to name ecclesiastical officials. After Henry had been excommunicated by Pope Gregory VII, Henry created his own pope, Clement III, and then tried to get backing for Pope Clement throughout Europe. This was remarkably effective, and Henry hoped that Rus would also support his new pope. Unfortunately, this was not to be, and the Russian metropolitan – the head of the Russian Church – refused Clement's overtures entirely. The ecclesiastical establishment in Rus, at

least at the elite level, was tied to Byzantium in a way that the secular establishment was not.

Not long after her marriage to Henry IV, Evpraksia ended up taking the side of the papacy, which by this point was under Pope Urban II. This decision went against her own husband, and she began a speaking tour throughout Europe. She spoke to priests and bishops and told them, in a script written by the papacy, that her husband was a Nicolaitian, a reference to a biblical sect that committed various untoward sexual practices. The sight of this young woman talking about her own husband, and sexual practices, helped to sway the bishops to support Urban II. She even spoke at his 1095 Council of Piacenza; all of which helped him in his struggle against Henry IV.

By the early twelfth century, Evpraksia was back in Rus, and after Henry IV's death, she entered a nunnery in 1106 and died in 1109. At her death, a chapel was erected in her honor in the Kyivan Caves Monastery (the holiest monastery in Rus) and she was buried there. This was a singular honor for a royal woman, and it was a testament to the work she accomplished on behalf of Rus throughout her life and throughout Europe.

A reconstruction of a Russian princess wearing *koltsi*, the lavish enamel-on-gold pendants that hung from a headdress and from a necklace as adornments.

© Julia Lillo



This bronze and iron knife in a sheath dates to the thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century Rus.

© The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



The eleventh century was a momentous time in Rus as its rulers and people were connected with the rest of the Christian European world and traded far beyond that as well. While this would last into the twelfth century, the thirteenth century would see dramatic changes for Rus and for medieval Europe.

Mongol invasion and crusades

The thirteenth century began with a momentous bang as the Fourth Crusade, originally intended for Egypt, was redirected by its authors and the Venetians to sack the city of Constantinople. Constantinople had been accumulating wealth since its foundation in the fourth century and thus was a ripe target, but it was also a Christian target, even if not subordinate to Rome. The sack of Constantinople in 1204 helped to create a permanent breach in relations between the Christianity of Rome and that of Constantinople, with ramifications for Christians throughout Europe.

One of the places that such ramifications were felt was in Rus. Initially, the 1204 attack in Constantinople was treated as simply another war and recorded in the Novgorod

Chronicle as such. But over the next two decades, as it became clear that the Latin Church had declared war not just on the specific Constantinopolitan Church, but on all non-Latin churches, Rus came to feel the effects.

This first became clear in 1222 when Pope Honorius III declared that all non-Latin churches should be closed in Latin lands. The decree took effect for Rusian churches in 1224 when the crusaders in Livonia took the city of Iurev (Dorpat, Tartu) and closed the Rusian churches there. Furthermore, the papal legate William of Sabina authorized his priests and monks to attempt to convert Rusians, signifying that they were not already Christian. These actions provoked a negative response among the Rusian rulers, leading Yaroslav of Novgorod to attack the city of Iurev in 1234.

These conflicts between the Latin Church and their crusaders and the Rusian rulers in the north-west began heating up at the same time that a new threat to Rus arrived on the steppe to the south and east – the Mongols. The Mongols first reached Rus in the 1220s, but

A modern reconstruction of one of the gates of Kyiv. It is called the Golden Gate after the famous gate in Constantinople with the same name.

© George Chernilevsky / Wikimedia Commons

In the mid-thirteenth century, a young boy named Onfim drew a picture of himself riding a horse and attacking an enemy on this piece of birch bark. He also copied out the first half of the alphabet in the upper right corner.

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Several miniatures in pen and ink from the *Radziwiłł Chronicle*. Created in the late fifteenth century, this book details the history of Kyivan Rus from the fifth to the early thirteenth centuries. Volodimir's baptism ca. 988 is shown in the lower right image.

© Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg, inv. 34.5.30

This thirteenth-century tempera-on-wood icon of the Virgin Orans shows a standing Virgin Mary with the Christ Child in an intercessory role, and two archangels in the roundels above. The gold leaf used in the highlights of the garments and the white haloes of the figures are distinctive features of this icon.

© The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

after a brief battle on the Kalka, which the Mongols won handily, they retreated to the eastern steppe and the Rusians treated them as just another nomadic group.

However, when the Mongols returned in the mid-1230s, it was clear that they were something else entirely. One way they made this felt was through their siege tactics, which took the city of Riazan in the winter of 1235–1236 using siege weaponry and scaling ladders, as well as infantry forces appropriated during their campaigns in China and Central Asia. The sack of Riazan was memorialized by a Rusian monk a few years later. In it, the monk focuses the attention of the reader, or hearer, on the savagery of the Mongols, called Tatars in the text; they attacked women, children, priests, and monks. They defiled holy altars and killed princesses. The text is filled with pathos attempting to influence the reader against these new attackers.

After Riazan, the Mongols attacked the cities of north-eastern Rus such as Vladimir and Suzdal, before making their way toward Novgorod, though not attacking it, and then heading south to sack Kyiv in 1240. The Mongol sack of Kyiv is often considered to be the endpoint of Kyivan Rus, though the city and Rus did survive and were largely incorporated into the Mongol World Empire.

Why then was Novgorod not sacked? Some people point to the actions of Alexander 'Nevsky', who was the ruler of Novgorod at this time. In the *Life of Alexander Nevsky*, parts of which were written by a contemporary and parts added later, it is said that Alexander was honoured by the Mongols and that he chose to fight the Latin crusaders, where he earned the epithet 'Nevsky'. From a logistical standpoint it makes sense – the Latin crusaders wanted the land, taxes, and to convert the populace, while the Mongols wanted taxes and craftsmen. Nevertheless, this has created a complex view of Alexander among historians, even if he is a saint in the modern Orthodox Church.

The kingdom of Rus was part of the expanse of medieval Europe. Its princesses became ruling queens of France, Hungary, Poland, Norway, and the German Empire. Rus was part of the political warp and weft of the continent, including religious ties with both Constantinople and Rome, as well as with the German lands. All in all, Kyivan Rus was part and parcel of medieval Europe. **MW**

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An intricately designed forged iron object used for striking fire. It dates to twelfth-century Rus.

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