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MAPPING THE LOST CAPITAL: HISTORICAL TOPOGRAPHY OF KYIV AS AN ANTIQUARIAN PROJECT¹

How old is the historical topography of ancient Kyiv? When did the place-names known to us from the pre-Mongol chronicles, after centuries of disuse or disappearance, take their current places on the map of the city? The received wisdom (always implied, never articulated, however) holds that these place-names were in continuous use, based on the widely shared conviction that the nomenclature of Kyiv topography represents a rare instance of continuity in the generally discontinuous history of Kyiv. After the city had virtually disappeared as a major center of policy and commerce in the second half of the thirteenth century, the wisdom goes, the place-names and their localization were preserved in popular memory up to the period when academic research began. In almost intact form, they were commended to modern scholarship. This view is supported further by the assumption that the recovery of the historical topography of ancient Kyiv came as a consequence of scientific enterprise and, as such, objectively reflects past reality.

In this essay, I will argue that the historical topography of ancient Kyiv is, in fact, a relatively new phenomenon, that no popular memory has maintained it through the centuries, and that, at least in its initial stage, the mapping of medieval Kyiv topography was carried out by means far from scientific. In other words, I will argue that the creation of the map was the result of reclaiming a lost history and that the process was as much a creation of the past as it was a reconstruction of it. First, I will offer some general observations about the process of mapping, and then I will show how it worked in one important case—the localization of the site where the first events of Kyiv’s written history took place, the so-called Askold’s Burial Mound.

In the early nineteenth century, the first serious inquiries into the history of Kyiv and the city’s topography were launched by those who formed their image of the city’s glorious past almost exclusively on the basis of old chronicles and historical accounts. They were predominantly Russians who lived in two imperial capitals and whose knowledge of Ukraine was rather limited. They were encouraged in their archeological pursuits by the newly created academic institutions and societies that, for the first time in Russian history, attempted a systematic examination of the antiquities of the empire. The academic community and the Russian public at large were excited at the time by the discoveries of Greek and Roman antiquities in the newly incorporated regions north of the Black Sea. “Ancient” Kyiv was discovered, as it were, en route to the Greek and Roman sites, and the archeological expedition, which in 1810 provided the first description of Kyivan antiquities, had as its primary destination the ancient cities of the Crimean peninsula (*Tavrida*).

The “discovery” of Kyiv came at a peculiar time in Russian history. Although technically the city had increasingly been incorporated into Muscovy (and later the Russian Empire) since the 1660s, for the next century it remained the only Russian possession in Right Bank Ukraine amidst the territories of the Polish

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Crown (Kingdom). As such, the city was viewed as a remote frontier town (one should add that up until the 1760s, Kyiv belonged to the autonomous Ukrainian Hetmanate). It was not until the late eighteenth century, after the abolition of the Hetmanate and the partitions of Poland, that Kyiv came into view of the Russian public almost as an extension of new imperial possessions. These new territories had a dubious status in the Russian mind. They were obviously not quite “Russian,” while at the same time it was generally believed that it was here that Russian history had begun. Thus the discovery of Kyiv, this “cradle” of Russian history, was an element of a broader drive to reclaim the roots of Russia’s past and to appropriate Ukraine as a part of Russian history.

Whatever the fortunes of the city, Kyiv never lost its appeal as one of the most important religious centers of Orthodox Slavdom. It was among the major pilgrimage destinations for the whole of Eastern Europe and attracted annually tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the Russian Empire. In a sense, the secular discovery of Kyiv followed the path of these religious pilgrimages, and the early travelers were both pious believers visiting the most treasured religious sites and tourists interested in historical rarities. Kyiv thus came to be viewed as a place where one could search for the ultimate origins of both Russian faith and Russian history.

The “pilgrims” who traveled from the imperial capitals to discover the noble ruins they had learned to expect from reading books were confronted by the rather humble appearance of an unremarkable provincial town. No ruins that had witnessed the days of old glorious princes were visible since the Golden Gates, the last “ruins” to survive through the eighteenth century, had been covered with earth in 1750. Even the medieval churches that did survive had been heavily remodeled according to the tastes of the not-so-distant past. The Polish-influenced Ukrainian Baroque city did not match the Byzantine-like image one would have expected to find. This was an old problem. In the Polish Renaissance literature, the obvious discrepancy between the historic fame combined with the spiritual importance of Kyiv and the absence of visible signs of former grandeur resulted in a topos of exotic ruins surrounded by uncultivated nature. (The image was of such power and attraction that some authors went even as far as suggesting that Kyiv was in fact ancient Troy.) Some two centuries later, the Romantic imagination worked in a similar vein. Early travelogues compensated for a lack of picturesque ruins with descriptions of picturesque nature and Kyiv landscapes.² Wild and presumably untouched natural settings somehow attested to the antiquity of the place. (Even if the city dwellers and their pathetic structures had not existed, then at least nature was the same and saw the first princes settling in Kyiv, since nature exists outside of human time and history.) This was not true either. Fortifications and considerable earthworks from as early as the sixteenth century had changed the ancient landscape considerably. But in the case of Kyiv visualizing the medieval city was an easier task, since the center of the town life has moved, and the site where the core of the medieval city once stood was practically vacant.

Where people of letters, authors of travelogues, imagined the ghost of the lost city set in an actual landscape, their fellow travelers, with a more scholarly mission in mind, preferred to construct a virtual city on paper according to what they learned from historic sources. Aleksandr Iermolaev and Konstantin Borozdin, members of the first archeological expedition of 1810, had the special assignment of producing a historic map of Kyiv that would represent the state of the city before the Mongol invasion.³ The expedition did produce such a map (it was later presented to the Emperor Alexander I together with related documentation),

and how they went about their task is illuminating since it became standard for decades to come. To its great disappointment, the expedition discovered that the ancient nomenclature had been completely lost, and there was nothing in the actual city that could possibly guide them. The first move was to seek out popular memory and oral tradition, but it proved to be of no help—no one in Kyiv knew the old place-names, nor could they point to their locations. Although Iermolaev later claimed that in some cases he was guided by old documents, it is clear from his report that the only scientific method employed was walking through the city and its outskirts searching for a spot that might have been this or that place mentioned in the chronicles.

Tours around the town with the aim of locating famous historical spots became routine. The most popular destination was probably the Skavyka hill, identified as *Shchekovitsa* of the chronicles, the place where Prince Oleh (Oleg) allegedly died and was buried in the early tenth century. The search for the burial mound of Oleh (already made famous by Aleksandr Pushkin's poem) was considered worthy of a hike by both amateurs like Andrei Murav'ov in the early 1840s and scholars of reputation like Mykhailo Maksymovych still later (both left colorful memoirs of their excursions). In the course of such tours, little by little, the historical topography of ancient Kyiv was recovered. Walks, emotions, and intuitions could not be presented as thorough documentation, however. Thus, once the map had been sketched out, Kyiv antiquarians started to look for more solid arguments to support it. The new discipline of archeology was the first to offer assistance, and one of the first Kyiv amateur archeologists, Kondratii Lokhvytsky, even tried to get an official document certifying that he indeed had found and excavated Prince Dir's burial mound, the grave of yet another early Kyiv ruler.

Archeological remains and artifacts, however, do not speak and generally are of little help when it comes to place-names. Quite expectedly, in keeping with the general vogue of the time, support was found in references to the alleged popular tradition. In the first half of the nineteenth century in Russia, as elsewhere in Europe, academics had begun to treat folk tradition seriously, collecting and publishing songs, tales, and toponymic legends. The appeal to popular tradition was taken seriously, so it is no wonder that the renowned student of ancient Kyiv topography, Mykola Zakrevsky, declared in the mid-nineteenth century that the ancient toponymy survived to modern times due to "uninterrupted popular tradition."⁴ He was right in a sense that by the time he was writing some of the most venerated Kyiv toponyms had acquired fabulous histories of their own. He was wrong as to the depth of this tradition, however. Recent studies have demonstrated that popular memory about Kyivan toponymics did not extend deeper than three generations back. By the turn of the nineteenth century, for example, even knowledge about the old structures that were still standing in the early 1700s was completely gone. (For example, no one knew where the Cathedral of St. Theodore of the twelfth century might have been, although its remains were still prominent in the city in the 1650s, when the Dutch artist Abraham van Westerfeld had sketched them, and disappeared only in the early eighteenth century when stone from them was used for the renovation of the St. Sophia Cathedral.) The same applies to the previous century. By the late 1690s the toponyms mentioned in documents from the 1610s as major landmarks in land disputes were no longer remembered. Yet, in at least one case, Mykola Zakrevsky, as those who wrote before him and after, was right in pointing to some sort of tradition. This tradition was neither popular, nor ancient, however, and the story of its rise, persistence, and embrace by scholarship is very instructive.

It is commonly asserted in historic literature that the site called “Uhorskoie” (Ugorskoe) in the Primary Chronicles, where according to the chronicle narrative Prince Oleh killed the princes Askold and Dir in 882, is located at a site close to the Nicholas Monastery, several miles down the Dnipro River from downtown Kyiv. This place, remarkable in its own right in modern Kyivan history, is still known as Askold’s Burial Mound and serves as a standard tourist stop in any tour of Kyiv. The chronicle entry of 882 is marked with special importance, since the events described are the first ones in recorded Kyivan history, and it is in this account that the Rurikid dynasty made its appearance in their future capital. As the chronicle story goes, Prince Oleh, travelling from Novgorod southward, stopped near Kyiv at the place called “Uhorskoie” and asked Askold and Dir, two princes who ruled in Kyiv, to come and meet him. After a brief conversation, Oleh killed both. Dir was buried close to St. Irene’s church and Askold buried right on the spot where he was killed, at “Uhorskoie.”⁵ Although from later chronicle accounts one can assume that in medieval Kyiv there were two burial mounds called respectively “Dir’s” and “Oleh’s” and certain localities were named after them, there is not a single mention of Askold’s burial mound. Yet the career of this fictitious toponym is remarkable. Not only is it featured prominently in scholarly literature, but (in contrast to the two others) it also made its way into the modern nomenclature of Kyiv topography. It is obvious that the scholars’ quest in locating “Askold’s Burial Mound” is based on an erroneous reading of chronicles. By analogy with two other mounds (of which only one, Oleh’s, was a place-name in the eleventh and twelfth centuries), scholars assumed that there must have been a certain landmark—a mound—called Askold’s and that this landmark gave its name to a certain place on the outskirts of medieval Kyiv. By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, all three princes’ graves had disappeared without a trace, but, united by the colorful story of initial murder and crime, they inspired Romantic imagination and served as especially attractive targets for archeological hunts. Discovering and mapping the three was like reenacting the moment when the city was conceived.

In spite of the rather firm belief expressed in the literature that Uhorskoie (apparently a suburban settlement) and Askold’s tomb should have been located at the site of the city park that bears the same name today, there is no indication in the sources that allows us to establish their proper place on the map. And it is not from the original sources that this idea first originated. This identification was made in amateurish and semi-amateurish writings of the first half of the nineteenth century, which relied (in the absence of other sources) on the local tradition of the St. Nicholas Monastery. Such a tradition did exist at the monastery, and it was on its premises that Askold’s Burial Mound was unveiled at the turn of the nineteenth century. How old was this tradition, however, and why was it important to the St. Nicholas Monastery (or those behind it) to “own” Askold’s tomb? To answer these questions, it is necessary to make a brief excursion into Ukrainian history-writing of the seventeenth century.

Before nineteenth century scholarship produced the reconstruction of Kyiv topography, which is now assumed to be accurate, there had existed an earlier layer constructed by Kyivan intellectuals of the seventeenth century. Later, this mainly legendary topography, partly wiped out and partly absorbed by antiquarians of the early nineteenth century, was proclaimed “an uninterrupted tradition.”⁶ The connection between the two is hardly realized now, and the legendary component of the current historical map is barely appreciated. The chronicle account of Askold’s death ends with the author’s remark that it took place where in

his own time there was an estate of a certain Olma. This Olma erected a St. Nicholas's Church on the territory. Just who this Olma was and when he might have lived is never specified. For us it is important, however, that in some later chronicles of Ruthenian provenance (in the so-called *Tver miscellany*, all extant copies of which are of Kyiv origin and of the seventeenth century), the name of the obscure and long forgotten Olma was changed to Olha (Olga). Thus, the whole account acquired an entirely new meaning: St. Nicholas's Church, on the site of Askold's Burial Mound, was built by the famous Kyiv princess, the first Christian ruler of the city at that. This important mistake was adopted by the so-called *Ukrainian Chronograph* (1630s) and from there it migrated to the *Sinopsis* (1670s–80s), by far the most influential text on Rus' (and Russian) history produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷ In addition, the *Sinopsis* concluded that not only was St. Nicholas built by the first sovereign to be baptized, but it was the first and oldest church in Kyiv. In the *Sinopsis*, however (as in all earlier texts), Askold's Burial Mound does not yet appear to be a place-name. There remained just one step to be made, and it was taken in the so-called *Koshchakovsky miscellany* of around 1700, which says that the place "is now known as Askold's Burial Mound."⁸ (The place could not have been called this earlier, since it was occupied by St. Nicholas. But the monastery had moved in 1690 to a nearby location and the territory was renamed.)

It is obvious that the whole construction emerged as a chain of successive elaborations on a single scribal error. But the results were of immense importance to the Orthodox of Kyiv and their quest to uncover and reclaim their faith and nation's roots in glorious times of the first princes. This movement, which originated as a reaction to the Union of Brest (1596) (that threatened the very existence of the Orthodox church in the post-Tridentine Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), continued after 1654, when Ukraine submitted to the protection of the Orthodox Muscovite state. In order to survive in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Orthodox were forced to redefine their confessional community in historical terms (a move that probably contributed to the final breakdown with Poland). Ironically, in the totally new and alien environment of the Muscovite state, the Ruthenian Orthodox once again had to explain just who they were and what their credentials were as a truly Christian people (that is, Orthodox according to Muscovite thought). In order to succeed in Muscovy, the Ruthenians had to demonstrate that they were as good as any other Orthodox and that in fact they belonged to essentially the same nation as the Russians, who saw themselves as the heirs of the earliest Russian history and spirituality.

The search for history began in the first decade of the seventeenth century, but the large-scale program of recovering the past is associated with archimandrite of the Kyivan Caves Monastery and later metropolitan (from 1632–47) of Kyiv, Petro Mohyla. Kyiv was made the focus of Ruthenian history and considerable efforts were spent on recreating its sacred topography. It should be noted, however, that the metropolitan and his team were not interested in historical research per se. Their mission was to reconstruct what they thought would connect their present with the times when Rus' was baptized by Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir) and his grandmother Olha. The search for origins was understood as a path to legitimization. Thus, during Petro Mohyla's tenure, those structures that date (or were believed to have come) from the time of St. Volodymyr were excavated, restored, or renovated (for example, the Church of Tithes, the Savior Church at Berestovo, St. Basil Church, etc.).⁹ Mohyla's time saw impressive book-printing activity by the Orthodox, some of the books dealing with Kyivan history. It is

important to note that one of these publications—*Teraturgima* of 1638—included the first map of the city, which served as both city plan and historical map.¹⁰

The driving force behind the whole enterprise was the Kyivan Caves Monastery, and it is thanks to its influence that Askold's Burial Mound was mapped where we find it today, on the territory of the "old St. Nicholas's Monastery." The ultimate goal of the Kyiv intellectuals who congregated around the Caves Monastery was to root as many contemporaneous institutions in pre-Mongol times as possible. Among others, St. Nicholas's Monastery also claimed to have come from the times of earliest Christianity in Kyiv (although its actual origins are not older than the second half of the fifteenth century). As was typical of seventeenth century historiography, by mere likeness of names, St. Nicholas's Monastery was identified as the church of St. Nicholas built by Princess Olha on Askold's Burial Mound. The chronological gap between the time of Olha (mid-tenth century) and the fifteenth-century cloister was filled out with quite a noble history, based on several coincidental resemblances. Thus, if the "Life of St. Theodosius" (one of the two most honored founding fathers of the Caves Monastery in the eleventh century) mentions that the saint's mother took her vows in St. Nicholas's convent, it must have been the one at Askold's Burial Mound.¹¹ The future metropolitan of Kyiv, Sylvestr Kosiv (Petro Mohyla's associate), claimed in the *Patericon* of 1635, printed by the Caves Monastery, that the tenth-century convent had been located where St. Nicholas's monastery is now, as evidenced by foundations still visible. Still later, the *Sinopsis* (also printed at the Caves Monastery) asserted (based on a well-known forged charter) that in the twelfth century, Grand Prince Andrei of Bogoliubovo donated to the Caves Monastery the town of Vasilev, birthplace of St. Theodosius, and St. Nicholas's Monastery (where the saint's mother was a nun).

Geographical proximity to the Caves Monastery was St. Nicholas's bad luck. A powerful neighbor waged and finally won the battle for its jurisdiction over St. Nicholas. It is noteworthy that the forging of the history of St. Nicholas's Monastery (all done by the Caves' monks) is in direct connection with this struggle. Having appropriated St. Nicholas, the Caves Monastery acquired not only the oldest church in Kyiv, but also several important personages linked to both the baptism of Rus' and to its own origin. This is how the idea of Askold's Burial Mound originated. In the eighteenth century it became a commonplace and in the nineteenth century it was proclaimed an uninterrupted popular tradition and as such entered the scientific historical topography of ancient Kyiv with hardly a reservation.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the growth of urban development that finally extended to the site of old Kyiv, the reconstructed map was transferred onto the ground of the real city. Traditional Kyivan place-names of the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries were being replaced by "historical" ones as actual toponyms. Thus, such marked names as Shchekovytsa and Khorevytsa (hills mentioned in the legendary account on the inception of the city) returned, and streets were given names of those noted in the chronicle. The actual topography of the city was called to testify to the illusory continuity of Kyivan history. Which it did: by the 1860s some Kyivan antiquarians were able to corroborate the accuracy of chronicle legends by pointing to street-names as evidence.

The story of mapping the topography of ancient Kyiv is at once a story of remembering and selective forgetting. It allowed those involved to come up with bold conjectures and constructions of their own, while presenting them as knowledge hallowed by continuous tradition. Each consecutive generation of dilettante

historians treated knowledge as a tradition accumulated by its predecessors in a general movement that obscured its constructed nature. The reconstruction of the historical map must have been presented as a process identical to the drawing of a physical map, so the final product would be trusted. Just as a geographer simply finds and charts his object, so the historian does not tamper with the historical landscape; he simply records what is in the tradition.

In conclusion, the historical topography of ancient Kyiv came about as a result of an antiquarian project started by amateur historians at the turn of the nineteenth century. Its general premise—resting upon tradition—was ideological, coming from Romantic Weltanschauung, rather than factual or empiric. Thus, what is believed to be solid scholarly knowledge is as much a cultural construct as it is the result of research.

NOTES

1. This essay is partly based on my more detailed discussion of the problem published in a series of articles. See Oleksii Tolochko, “Zamitky z istorychnoi topografii domonhol’s’koho Kyieva,” parts I–V, *Kyivska starovyna* 3 (1997): 152–67; 5 (2000): 144–63; 6 (2000): 166–9.

2. On Russian travelogues of the time, see Andreas Xavier Schönle, *Authenticity and Fiction in the Russian Literary Journey, 1790–1840* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000). See also Michele Colucci, “Il Puteshestvie v Poludennuiu Rossiiu di V.V.Izmajlov,” in Luca Calvi and Gianfranco Giraudo, eds., *Che cosè l’Ucraina? Ucrainica Italica* 1 (Padua: E.U.A., 1998), 47–56.

3. For the documents left by the expedition, see Oleksii Tolochko, “Dokumenty pershoi istoriko-arkheolohichnoi ekspedytsii na Ukrainu,” *Kyivs’ka starovyna* 3 (1998): 175–91. The map in question was published by Mikhail Pogodin, *Drevniaia russkaia istoriia, do mongol’skogo iga. Vol. 3, part 1. Atlas istoricheskii, geograficheskii, arkheologicheskii s obiasnieniem* (Moscow, 1871, fol. 74). Four albums of drawings by the expedition’s drawer Ivanov are now kept in the Manuscript Division of the Russian National Library (St. Petersburg); they were partially published in *Trudy I arkheologicheskogo s’ezda* (Moscow: v tipografii Imperatorskoj Akademii nauk, 1871).

4. Mykola Zakrevsky, *Opisanie Kiev, 2 vols.* (Moscow: Napechatano izhdiveniem Moskovskogo arkheologicheskogo obshchestva, 1868), 1:124.

5. See *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, vol. 1 (Petrograd: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1927), n.p., col. 16–7.

6. Zakrevsky, *Opisanie Kiev*, 1:124.

7. For the text of *Sinopsis*, see Hans Rothe, ed., *Sinopsis, Kyiv 1681: Facsimile mit einer Einleitung* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1983), 169–70.

8. The *Koshchakovsky miscellany* manuscript was not published; it is preserved in the Manuscript Division at the Lviv Stefanyk Library of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

9. For the best survey of Petro Mohyla’s “archeological” activity, see Stepan Golubev, *Kievskii mitropolit Petr Mogila i ego spodvizhniki*, 2 vols. (Kyiv: Tip. G. T. Korchak-Novitskii, 1883–98).

10. For a facsimile edition of *Teraturgima* by Atanasii Kal’nofois’kyi, as well as *Patericon* by Sylvestr Kosiv, see *Seventeenth-Century Writings on the Kievan Caves Monastery, Harvard Library of Early Ukrainian Literature, Texts*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, distributed by Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 119–326, 7–116.

11. See “The Life of Feodosij,” in *The Hagiography of Kievan Rus’*, trans. Paul Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, distributed by Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 45.

