CHAPTER FIVE

THE EASTERN SLAVIC POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The onset of Vladimir’s rule initiated a more complex and generally a less recognizable role for three ancient Eastern Slavic institutions—the князь, воеводы (the military aristocratic commanders), and the вече (the urban popular assembly)—in Kievan princely affairs. Heretofore, as we have observed, Rus’ annalists and scribes had concerned themselves with theoretical speculations upon the nature and the image of Kievan princely power. But in describing the nature and developing an image of Kievan princely rulership, Rus’ apologists could not exclude the native князь, воеводы, and вече from such considerations and may have sought to explain the displacement of the local князь and воеводы through the appearance of a hereditary Scandinavian aristocracy and the diminution in the influence of the вече through the rise of a monolithic, autocratic, and seemingly powerful national Riurikid ruling house. Against this background, we should notice the significant observation of Jonathan Shepard: “The ’land of Rus’ was an archipelago of largely self-regulating communities. Extensive groupings in the north were still considered tribes ....” A reinvestigation of the role of these institutions in the formative period of political and religious changes under Vladimir and Jaroslav merits attention, and of how these institutions impacted upon the evolution of the nature and the image of the Kievan princes or diminished the effectiveness of their rule.

The князь, descendants of tribal and clan leaders, have their roots in antiquity. These princes became in the seventh and eighth centuries the

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nucleus of a hereditary class of territorial nobles who held their domains as personal property. And too, these centuries are a most important transitional period in the evolution of Eastern Slavic political and social concepts. A major advance to shape their ideological outlook was the rise of trading centers (грады) and the growth of these outposts into towns and larger urban units. The князь, as population concentrated at specific centers, began to abandon patriarchal rule over a given tribe or clan, and assumed the role of leadership over particular geographic regions, which had at their core trading towns of varying size and commercial significance.\(^3\) Tribal life, however, continued to predominate over much of the Rus’ lands and the term князь, though known among the Eastern Slavs, is sparingly used and does not appear to have been widely adopted. There is little evidence then that the Eastern Slavs had developed an extensive national and native hereditary ruling house. Vladimir’s powers were never seriously challenged by local князь claims to shared authority in the governance of the Kievan principality. The explanation for this development is historical in nature. First, the Riurikid princes, if in fact the usage of the term is valid and not adopted by the Northmen or invented by the Rus’ scribes given the limited political and social advancement of the Varangians in that age who preceded Vladimir, did not suppress local initiatives. The Slavic грады and tribal centers could retain traditional social-political institutions so long as they remained in consonance with Riurikid interests. But frequent acts of rebellion forced Oleg and his successors to put down the insubordinate Slavs and to introduce the practice of appointing lesser Varangian aristocrats and бояры to newly created administrative-defensive centers. The consequence of this practice was to enhance the commercial-martial interests of the Riurikid house and to hasten the process of subordinating the political and commercial practices of the local князь to the authority of the Kievan prince.\(^4\)

Then, too, after the eighth century a symbiosis of Scandinavian and Slavic aristocratic families and even intermarriage took place. Scandinavian

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4 Cf. supra, pp. 16–17.