INTRODUCTION

The influence of Byzantine material culture in Kievan Rus’ after its conversion to Christianity in 988 is apparent in the appropriation of imperial costume and regalia, church decoration, and architecture. Scholars have acknowledged the continuation of certain aspects of Rus’ style and iconography after 988, but nevertheless have approached Kievan Rus’ as a peripheral state that imitated the visual and ceremonial languages of Constantinople.1 I propose a

1 Scholars attribute aspects of St. Sophia’s architectural style to Rus’ or other non-Byzantine sources including the two western façade towers and the elongated domes. See Olexa Powstenko, The Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev (New York, 1954), pp. 35–36; Hrihoriy Lohvin, Kiev’s Hagia Sophia: State Architectural-Historical Monument (Kiev, 1971), pp. 8–9. The extent to which scholars believe the Rus’ imitated Byzantine style in the visual arts varies. Ihor Ševčenko states that Rus church decoration was a slavish imitation of Byzantine sources, while more recently Elena Boeck, limiting her analysis to the hippodrome murals, asserts that Kiev does not try to replicate Constantinopolitan culture but appropriated Byzantine visual representations of power for their own purposes: Ihor Ševčenko, Byzantium and the Slavs: In Letters and Culture (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), p. 165; Elena Boeck, “Simulating the Hippodrome: The Performance of Power in Kiev’s St. Sophia,” The Art Bulletin 91/3 (2009), p. 295. Scholars have focused their study of St. Sophia’s mosaics and frescoes on those located in the nave and crossing. Viktor Lazarev has made important observations regarding Jaroslav’s family portrait above the west entrance and the frescoes in the crossing and gallery. He presents a strong analysis of the frescoes but he relies on Byzantine models of iconography that limit the frescoes’ range of possible interpretations: Viktor Lazarev and
study of St. Sophia in Kiev within the local political context. By approaching St. Sophia’s decorative program through the lens of its patron, the Grand Prince Jaroslav I (r.1019–1054), I suggest the monument and its array of saints and narrative scenes come into better focus. A comprehensive study of Jaroslav’s St. Sophia will demonstrate how the decorative program served political ideology. I argue that as a new Orthodox prince, Jaroslav did not build his state church to slavishly imitate Byzantine church decoration, but to present himself through a new Rus’ Orthodox visual language as the recipient of divine providence in his own right. I do not intend to suggest a reconstruction of lost frescoes but rather to focus on the choice and arrangement of surviving scenes. My focus on political and dynastic themes does not preclude other possible interpretations of the decorative program, but demonstrates the multiple levels of meaning.