ARTICLES

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WHAT CAN ARCHAEOLOGY TELL US ABOUT HOW DEBTS WERE DOCUMENTED AND COLLECTED IN KIEVAN RUS'?

INTRODUCTION

The restrictions [on the Hansa’s credit transactions] came from the east, which was economically less developed than the west. Trade, especially in Russia, often took the form of barter. . . . The settlement of loans provided a further source of dispute with the Russians, which it was thought better to avoid. Thus the second schra of the Novgorod Kontor (ca. 1295) forbade all credit transactions (Borgkauf) under pain of a fine. 1

P. Dollinger, The German Hansa

And their country (i.e., Rus') is secure [for conducting commercial activities]. When a Muslim enters into a [commercial] arrangement with anyone and the Slav goes bankrupt, then he, his children, and his house are sold to pay the merchant his debt. 2

Abu Hamid al-Garnâfî
(a mid-twelfth-century Spanish-Islamic traveler to Rus')

The availability of credit to merchants is an essential tool for conducting large-scale commercial operations. 3 Loans also play an important role in add-

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ing to the monetary supply circulating in the marketplace. A high volume of credit transactions also stimulates the economy, since a lack of ready cash does not prevent people from making purchases and investments. This was particularly true in pre-modern economics, which often experienced shortages in the volume (and quality) of currencies. Thus, credit plays a multi-sided role in any economy. However, in order to have a well-functioning system of credit and moneylending, it is vital to have reliable ways of documenting and collecting the lent capital. Thus, to understand the role of credit, moneylending, and the economy, as a whole, of medieval Rus', it is crucial to understand how the Rus' system of commercial law functioned.

The most important sources for the study of medieval West European, Islamic, and Byzantine commercial law are the written documents, mainly contracts, town-registers, and laws. Historians involved in the study of medieval Rus', however, have few, if any, such documents. Consequently, they have been unable to address many of the topics which have been discussed by historians of medieval Western Europe, the Islamic East, and Byzantium, such as the development of commercial law. The lack of primary written sources on these topics may explain why many scholars who are used to working with more adequate documentary evidence, like Dollinger (see his quote above), tend to wrongly view the commercial history of Kievan Rus' as backward and underdeveloped.

The small number of commercial-legal documents from Kievan Rus' seems very strange in light of the fact that some scholars believe that merchants could write, as is evidenced by the birch-bark texts. However, in or-

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6. We do not wish to get involved in the controversial debate over the extent to which literacy was widespread in medieval Rus'. This question has been addressed by numerous scholars. For some of the basic arguments at opposite ends of the debate, see N. S. Chaev, Istoriia kul'tury