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**The Annals of St. Bertin (839)
and *Chacanus* of the *Rhos***

In 839, an embassy from Emperor Theophilus arrived in the court of Louis the Pious at Ingelheim, accompanied by some men who claimed that they belonged to the people called *Rhos* (*qui se, id est gentem suam, Rhos vocari dicebant*) and who asked Louis' permission to pass through his empire on their way back home. This matter was thoroughly investigated at the Carolingian court, and the Frankish emperor came to the conclusion that they belong to the *gens* of Swedes.¹ This record in *The Annals of St. Bertin* for the year 839 became the first written record on the Rus'/Rhos and has been analyzed in scholarly literature since the eighteenth century. This passage has been used to trace the Scandinavian origins of the Rhos as well as the political structure existing among the early Rus'.²

Modern surveys of Rus' history, such as the one by Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, narrate that in these Frankish annals the chief of the Rhos was called *chaganus* (khagan), similar to the title of the Khazarian rulers, and draw certain conclusions about the political organization of early Rus' from the use of such a title.³ This belief in the use of this title by the rulers of the Rhos ca. 839 became a part of a modern scholarly discourse, and most prominent scholars working on the history of early Rus' and the Khazars refer to this as a well-established fact, which does not need any argument. For instance, Omeljan Pritsak states that the existence of the Rus' Kaganate was "first attested about 839"; and Vladimir Ja. Petrukhin, writes that "[t]he power of the khagan [among the Khazars — I. G.] could still be real at least in the 830s, when the Russian princes appeared to raise claims for the first time to his title (*chaganus* according to the *Annales Bertiniani*, ad a. 839)."⁴

Such statements are confirmed by the modern translations of *the Annals of St. Bertin*. The English edition by Janet Nelson, referred to by Franklin and Shepard, gives the following translation of the analyzed passage:

1 *Annales Bertiniani*, a. 839, ed. G. Waitz, MGH, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum* (Hanover, 1883), 19–20.

2 For the classical analysis of the account in English and all references see Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200* (London and New York, 1996), 29–32.

3 Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 31–41.

4 "A Note on the Sacral Status of the Khazarian Khagan: Tradition and Reality," in *Monotheistic Kingship: The Medieval Variants*, ed. Aziz Al-Azmeh and Janos M. Bak, CEU *Medievalia*, no. 6 (Budapest, 2004), 269.

He [Theophilus — I. G.] also sent with the envoys some men who said they — meaning their whole people [*gens*] — were called Russians and had been sent to him by **their king whose name was the Khagan** for the sake of friendship, so they claimed. ... When the Emperor [Louis the Pious — I. G.] investigated more closely the reason for their coming here, he discovered that they belong to the people of the Swedes.⁵

This translation corresponds with the German edition by Reinhold Rau, used by Petrukhin:

Mit ihnen schickte er auch einige Männer, die sich, d. h. das Volk, dem sie angehörten, Rhos nannten: **ihr König, Chagan mit Namen**, hatte sie, wie sie sagten, an ihn aus Freundschaft geschickt ... Bei einer genaueren Nachforschung nach dem Grund ihrer Reise erfuhr der Kaiser, daß sie dem Volke der Sueonen angehörten.⁶

Yet the original Latin text published by Weitz in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* in the late nineteenth century contains a very significant difference from modern translations: it says that the ruler of the Rhos was named not *chaganus*, but *chacanus*:

Misit etiam cum eis quosdam, qui se, id est gentem suam, Rhos vocari dicebant, quos **rex illorum chacanus vocabulo** ad se amicitiae, sicut asserebant, causa direxerat... Quorum adventus causam imperator diligentius investigans, comperit, eos gentis esse Sueonum.⁷

Based on such a spelling of the royal name, *chacanus*, some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians thought that it simply meant the Scandinavian name *Håkan*. But already in the first half of eighteenth century, the orientalist Gottlieb (Theophilus) Siegfried Bayer argued that this name referred to the title “khagan,” used by the Turkic peoples of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This interpretation was further developed by Ernst Kunik in the nineteenth century.⁸ The second interpretation was considered as more authoritative and prevailed in the late nineteenth century. Yet at that time, scholars still felt necessary to explain why they chose that interpretation, as did Mikhailo

5 Janet L. Nelson, ed., *The Annals of St-Bertin* (Manchester, 1991), 44.

6 Reinhold Rau, ed., *Annales Bertiniani*, in *Quellen zur karolingischen Reichsgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt, 1969), 45.

7 *Annales Bertiniani*, a. 839, ed. Waitz, MGH, 19–20.

8 For the examples of the first interpretation, see Stroube de Piermont, *Dissertation sur les anciens Russes* (St. Petersburg, 1785); A. L. Schlözer, *Nestor. Russische Annalen in ihrer slawonischen Grundsprache*, vol. 1–5 (Göttingen, 1802–9); W. von Gutzeit, *Die Nachricht über die Rhos des Jares 839* (Riga, 1882); and M. P. Pogodin, *Issledovanija, zamechanija i lekciji po russkoj istoriji* (Studies, notes and lectures on Russian history), vol. 1–7 (Moscow, 1846–56). I am grateful to Oleksiy P. Tolochko for providing me with the historiographic data on Khagan-versus-Håkan debate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the data which otherwise would not have been available to me.

For detailed criticism of Schlözer’s interpretation, combined with the argument in support of the second interpretation see Ernst Kunik, *Die Berufung der schwedischen Rodsen durch die Finnen und Slawen*, vol. 1–2 (St. Petersburg, 1844–45), 2: 193–284.

Hrushevsky in 1898.⁹ The “khagan” interpretation became an axiom in Soviet, as well as subsequent Russian and Ukrainian, historiographies; and nowadays most scholars do not even feel it necessary to provide an argument for the khagan of the Rus’ as early as 839.¹⁰ Even when scholars use the spelling “*chacanus*” in their reference to *The Annals of St. Bertin*, they take it as a variation, “*хакан*” or “*какан*”, of the same Turkic title “khagan.”¹¹ Yet the examples of the spelling “*хакан*” can be found only in Arabic, Persian, Armenian and Georgian writings, not in Old Ruthenian, Greek or Latin sources, except the passage in *The Annals of St. Bertin*.¹²

On the following pages, I would like to bring some manuscript and linguistic evidence questioning the interpretation of the passage in *The Annals of St. Bertin*, established by Bayer and Kunik. The first thing which ought to be mentioned is the uniqueness for Frankish sources of the spelling “*chacanus*.” This spelling was corrected to “*chaganus*” by Reinhold Rau in his new edition of the Latin text of the annals, accompanied with its German translation, mentioned earlier.¹³ Because his edition lacks *apparatus criticus*, it is difficult to see his rationale for such a correction. In the introduction to his edition, Rau wrote that for the period from 839 to 863 he used a seventeenth-century copy of a fragment of *The Annals of St. Bertin* in order to compare and correct the classical MGH edition of the annals by Weitz, because that copy presented “*vielfach besseren Text*” than the manuscripts used by Weitz.¹⁴ The question is to what extent one can trust a seventeenth-century copy of a manuscript, since it is known that, in the early modern period, editors could correct medieval abnormalities in their texts to proper classical Latin.

The comparison of the paragraph describing the Rhos in Weitz’ and Rau’s editions supports such a suspicion. Rau corrected such abnormalities which Weitz had tried to preserve, even if they did not work grammatically, and he had often given a proper form in a footnote:

1. *spatarius* is corrected to *spatharius*;
2. *ferentes cum donis imperatori dignis epistola* to *ferentes cum donis imperatori dignis epistolam*;
3. *inter utrumque imperatorem eique subditos* to *inter utrumque imperatorem eisque subditos*;

9 See the recent English translation of this work: Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus*, ed. Bohdan Struminsky, vol. 1. *From Prehistory to the Eleventh Century* (Edmonton and Toronto, 1997), 300–301 and 482–483.

10 M. I. Artamonov, *Istorija Khazar* (History of the Khazars) (Leningrad, 1962), 365; and A. P. Novoseltsev *Khazarскоje gosudarstvo i ego rol’ v istoriji vostocnoj Rusi i Kavkaza* (The Khazarian state and its role in the history of Eastern Rus’ and Caucasia) (Moscow, 1990), 206–208.

11 A. P. Novoseltsev, “K voprosu ob odnom iz drevnejshikh titulov russkogo kniazia (On the question of one of the most ancient titles of the Rus’ prince),” *Istorija SSSR* 1982, no. 4: 150–9; and G. G. Litavrin, *Vizantija, Bolgarija, Drevnaja Rus’ (IX — nachalo XII v.)* (Byzantium, Bulgaria, Ancient Rus’ (9th–12th centuries) (St. Petersburg, 2000), 37–46; and Ye. A. Mel’nikova, ed., *Drevnaja Rus’ v svete zarubezhnyh istochnikov* (Early Rus in foreign sources) (Moscow, 2001), 288–89.

12 Novoseltsev, “K voprosu ob odnom iz drevnejshikh titulov russkogo kniazia,” 151–52.

13 Rau, ed., *Annales Bertiniani*, 44.

14 *Ibid.*, 5.

4. *chacanus* to *chaganus*;5. *per imperium suum toto habere to per imperium suum tuto habere*;6. *exploratores* to *et exploratores*.

These examples shed serious doubt on Rau's correction of *chacanus* to *chaganus*, especially because, as *apparatus criticus* at the MGH edition indicates, the first form is used in all three manuscripts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which are the oldest surviving manuscripts with the text of *The Annals of St. Bertin*.

Earlier Frankish annals written at the Carolingian court, *The Royal Frankish Annals*, mention the khagans of Avars in the records for the years 782 and 805, but this source never uses the spelling of *The Annals of St. Bertin*. *The Royal Frankish Annals* use the form *caganus* for 782, *chagan* and *kagan* for 796, and *caganus* for 805.¹⁵ All these forms express the same phonetic form "khagan." This title was mentioned later, in 871, in the letter of Louis II to the Byzantine Emperor Basil I: "We have found out that, in fact, we call khagan (*chaganum*) the leaders of the Avars, not of the Khazars or Northmen."¹⁶ With reliance on the established "khagan" interpretation of the passage in *The Annals of St. Bertin*, Franklin and Shepard disregard this statement of Louis II by stating that "Louis' letter was a polemical riposte and his protestation of ignorance is not conclusive evidence as to whether or not a *chaganus* of the Swedish Northmen was known to the Franks."¹⁷ Yet the statement in Louis' letter agrees with the use of the term *chaganus* to describe the rulers of the Avars in *The Royal Frankish Annals* and makes a perfect sense if one accepts that *chacanus* in the analyzed passage of *The Annals of St. Bertin*, which was a product of the Carolingian court up to the year 843,¹⁸ had a different meaning.

Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider the earlier reading *chacanus* as the Scandinavian name Håkan, especially because the nineteenth-century "advocates" of the "kha-gan" interpretation, having provided many comparative materials for the use of such a title among Turkic peoples, did not offer strong arguments against the reading of *chacamus* as Håkan. For instance, Kunik wrote many pages on the use of the title "khagan," but he raised only one, philological, argument against Schlözer's reading. According to Kunik, no name in Swedish starts with *ch-* and the weak Germanic *h* was not written in Greek or Slavic languages. Kunik argued that the name Håkan would sound in Greek as 'Ακουυ, and could have been written in Latin only as "*Acumus*." Yet as many other scholars, he did not explain the use *-c-* instead of *-g-* at the middle of the word.¹⁹

The text, on the other hand, states that the people belonging to the Rhos, and who turned out to be Swedes later on—this means at least that they spoke Old

¹⁵ *Annales regni Francorum*, in MGH, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum*, vol. 7, *Annales regni Francorum et annales q. d. Einhardi*, ed. Georg H. Pertz and Friedrich Kurze (Hanover, 1895), 60–1, 98, and 120.

¹⁶ "Chaganum vero nos praelatum Avarum, non Gazanorum aut Nortmannorum nuncupari repperimus ...," *Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, vol. 5, ed. E. Gaspar et al., MGH, *Epistolae*, vol. 7 (Berlin, 1928), 388.

¹⁷ Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 32.

¹⁸ Nelson, ed., *The Annals of St-Bertin*, 8.

¹⁹ Kunik, *Die Berufung der schwedischen Rodsen*, 1:218.

Nordic—theyself named their king *chacamus*. Why should have they named him in Greek or Slavic, not in old Norse? By 839, Northmen had visited the Carolingian imperial palace several times; the most famous example is the baptism of Harold Klak and his noble followers in 826. Apparently, they were able to communicate effectively with the Franks speaking another Germanic language, *lingua theodiscam*. Could not it be the language the people of Rhos spoke which, among other things, caused suspicions in the Frankish court and led to a thorough investigation? Kunik's argument that no Swedish name starts with *ch-* does not work also because this name was written down in Latin in a Frankish source. In fact, many Germanic names starting with phonetic *h-* were transcribed in Frankish sources with *ch-*.²⁰ For instance, the name of Louis the Pious, whose original Germanic name *Hludvih* was modified into the imperial name *Hludovicus* after 814, could be transcribed with the initial *ch-*. Such a spelling is recorded in a charter issued by Charlemagne's sister, Gisela, at the imperial palace at Aachen in 799. Louis, at that time King of Aquitaine, was one of the witnesses who signed this charter; and his name in the genitive case is written by a scribe as *Chlodoici*.²¹ Thus, the entire linguistic argument advanced by Kunik against a possible reading of *chacamus* as the personal name *Håkan* simply does not work. This name exists in modern Swedish and derives from the Old Nordic form *Håkon/Håkan*: the form *Hakan* is testified in medieval Norway, and the form *Håkan* in late medieval Finland.²²

Such an interpretation of the passage in *The Annals of St. Bertin* suggests that by 839 this *konung Hakan*, accompanied by his military followers from Scandinavia, most likely from East Sweden, operated in North Rus'. It is another question whether *Håkan*, king of the Rhos, had a permanent seat, or was on constant move, as many chiefs of the Northmen were in the other parts of North Europe, either collecting tribute in the region under control or plundering neighbors.²³ It is also another question, unrelated to this paper, how this Rhos identity brought from East Scandinavia was gradually disseminated among the Eastern Slavs. But what is obvious from the preceding analysis is that it is very unlikely that this *konung* took the name of khagan around the year 839, with all political implications and claims connected to it.

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²⁰ For examples see Hubertus Menke, *Das Namengut der frühen karolingischen Königsurkunden: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung des Althochdeutschen* (Heidelberg, 1980).

²¹ *Chartae Latinae Antiquiores: Facsimile-Edition of the Latin Charters Prior to the Ninth Century*, 1st series, *Prior to the Ninth Century*, ed. Robert Marichal and Albert Bruckner, 49 vols. (Zurich: Dietikon, 1954–1998), 16: 90–1, no. 636.

²² Eivind Vågslid, *Norderlendske fyrenamn: Namnebok* (Eidsvoll, 1988), 195. I would like to thank Dr. Eldar Heide for helping me with the analysis of the Old Nordic form of *Håkan*.

²³ For archeological evidence showing the settlement of Scandinavians in North Russia by the first half of the ninth century, see Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 31–5, and Tamara Pushkina, "Viking-Period Pre-Urban Settlements in Russia and Finds of Artifacts of Scandinavian Character," in *Land, Sea and Home*, ed. John Hines and al (Leeds, 2004), 37–53.