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## Identity in Flux: Finding Boris Kolomanovich in the Interstices of Medieval European History

Christian Raffensperger

Wittenberg University, [craffensperger@wittenberg.edu](mailto:craffensperger@wittenberg.edu)

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# IDENTITY IN FLUX: FINDING BORIS KOLOMANOVICH IN THE INTERSTICES OF MIEVEAL EUROPEAN HISTORY

CHRISTIAN RAFFENSPERGER

MIEVEAL HISTORY IS not a static discipline. It is constantly changing to incorporate new methods and new challenges to existing frameworks. The critique of the concept of feudalism over the last forty years is just one example among many.<sup>1</sup> However, some paradigms are more resistant to change, even in twenty-first-century scholarship. Two of these are the nation and the family, especially the dynastic family. The baggage of nationalism is still being carried in East European studies more broadly, and in medieval historiography in particular. Modern nation-states are still using the history of great medieval dynasties as a way to reinforce their claims to sovereignty and territory. This is especially true in modern eastern Europe,<sup>2</sup> but it is also applicable to western Europe as well.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, historians writing about all of Europe implicitly reinforce these modern claims to medieval identity by projecting modern nation-states back into the

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I would like to thank the anonymous readers of this piece for their suggestions, as well as my co-contributors, Elizabeth Lambourn and Carl Nappi, for their collegial comments. Special thanks go to Carol Symes who suggested (strongly) that I reconceptualize the article in its entirety and devoted much time and effort to editing.

**1** The original critique began forty years ago in Brown, "Tyranny of a Construct." For a recent overview of this issue, see Abels, "The Historiography of a Construct."

**2** Serhii Plokhy has observed "that perceptions of the premodern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, both in their homelands and in the West, are still shaped by the views of national historians and the paradigms they created": *Origins of the Slavic Nations*, ix. In a similar vein, Przemysław Urbańczyk has offered that "despite many changes in geopolitical circumstances and internal situations, the patriotic-nationalistic sentiments are still present in discussions of the early medieval history in East Central Europe": "Early State Formation," 141.

**3** Patrick Geary, in *Myth of Nations*, has investigated the same concept's hold in western Europe. However, the status and stakes of scholarship on western medieval Europe is categorically different within the American academy. Someone who specializes in the eleventh-century Loire valley is considered "a medievalist," while someone who focuses on eleventh-century Kiev is classified as a "Russianist" or "Ukrainianist." This horizontal versus vertical disciplinary dichotomy represents a major hurdle to viewing the medieval world as it actually was; hence the mission of *The Medieval Globe*. See also the dialogue between Kathleen Davis and Michael Puett in this issue.

past: “medieval Russia,” “medieval Poland,” “medieval France,” and so on. In this context, families are typically portrayed as stable, monolithic patrilineal entities that descend from an identifiable (semi- or totally mythical) forbear whose line continues for hundreds of years. Those dynasties (e.g., Piast for Poland, Riurikid for Rus’, Árpád for Hungary) are then used as stand-ins for the nation, especially in the absence of other national designators, such as modern governmental institutions, borders, or ideas of nationhood.

This article challenges both of those categories, the nation and the dynasty, through a case study focused on a historical actor who had no nation and no family—at least not as recognized by contemporary chroniclers or modern historians. And because he has been left out of medieval history, his life is an instructive one, shedding light on the ways that medieval politics and medieval families were bound together: it reveals that historical actors situated themselves not in linear dynasties but within kinship webs that allowed them to create situational kinship networks to aid them in times of need.<sup>4</sup> Reconstructing and analyzing these networks is difficult, and it complicates our view of the medieval world in important ways. To take just one brief, general example: the Riurikids and Piasts were intermarried to a great extent during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the members of these families were intimately involved in one another’s affairs, most clearly seen in the military sphere. But the history of these interactions, as exemplified by the phrasing of the previous sentence, is written by focusing first on one, then the other, either Riurikid (Rus’/Russia/Ukraine) or Piast (Poland). The interconnectivity of those families, however, makes it clear that these individuals were instead focused on their own affairs, utilizing whichever members of their kinship web were most advantageous to them at a given time, regardless of modern ideas of dynasty or nation. Such a history, of an individual actor situated in a kinship web constructing situational kinship networks, is more difficult to grasp but more accurate, and potentially more interesting, than relying on reified modern paradigms read back into the past.

Our unlikely protagonist is one Boris Kolomanovich, whose life of unfulfilled ambitions will illustrate the problems inherent in the way we currently discuss medieval kingdoms and families, and whose fate invites us to better understand the ways that individuals utilized, or constructed, their family dynamic: that particular combination of politics and family ties that helped medieval kingdoms negotiate their relationships with one another and the world around them. Boris was an elite male, the son of a king and queen, and as such should be fodder for

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<sup>4</sup> The key concepts of kinship webs and situational kinship networks will be discussed and explained in greater detail below.



**Map 1. The World of Boris Kolomanovich.** Map created by the author.

traditional top-down history writing. But Boris rarely appears as an actor in either primary or secondary sources.<sup>5</sup> This is part of what makes him an unlikely protagonist, and is central to the first question raised by the study of his life: what causes Boris to fall between the cracks? The question has several answers, but three are important for our purposes. First, Boris cannot be seen as affiliated with a modern nation-state. He is not Hungarian, or Russian, or Ukrainian, and thus those who choose to write about modern nation-states (projected back into the past) rarely include him.<sup>6</sup> Second, he does not ever succeed in his ambitions, or in obtaining his birthright as he conceptualized it: to become king.<sup>7</sup> Kings, even bad ones, get space in history books, but failed kings often do not. Third, he is not the subject

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Urbansky is the sole example I have found of a historian who integrates Boris into a synthetic explanation of events: see *Byzantium and the Danube Frontier*. There is only one study, nearly a century old, devoted entirely to him and his mother: Rozanov, "Evmfimiia Vladimirovna i Boris Kolomanovich."

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*; Martin, *Medieval Russia*; Engel, *Realm of St. Stephen*. There are a large variety of such works to choose from, and I have selected only a representative three in which Boris occupies less than a single page. All are by scholars I think highly of.

<sup>7</sup> Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII*, 34–35. I have attempted to cite English language translations of medieval primary sources, or at least note them, where available to make this article as accessible as possible to the largest audience. English serves an acceptable lingua franca for scholars who work on medieval Europe, both in East and West.

of a chronicle or even the object of hatred of a chronicler. Because of points one and two, Boris only appears in our sources when he interacts with those who are the subjects of such chronicles: luckily for us, since in his attempt to actualize his dream of rule, Boris traveled through a large swathe of the medieval world, including the kingdoms of Rus', Poland, and Hungary, and the German and Byzantine empires (Map 1).<sup>8</sup> So to write the story of Boris, and to complicate the histories of kingdoms and dynasties, we need to reconstruct his movements and analyze them for what they can tell us about family dynamics and situational kinship roles. Our larger goal is to fashion a new vocabulary that better articulates the ways that medieval people constructed their own medieval globe.

### Situational Kinship and Kinship Webs

This new vocabulary for discussing and better understanding medieval family dynamics begins with two terms: kinship webs and situational kinship networks. These two terms set up a framework that allows for a less anachronistic discussion of medieval relationships and, moreover, provides one that is portable throughout much of the medieval world. Their explication here is a necessary first step in laying the foundation for the case study of Boris Kolomanovich.

Traditionally, medieval European dynasties are envisioned as patrilineal, such that each male ruler is descended from the prior male ruler whose descent is traced back to the eponymous founder of the dynasty. In Rus', for example, Volodimer the Great (r. 980–1015) was succeeded by Iaroslav the Wise (sole ruler, 1036–54) who was succeeded by Iziaslav Iaroslavich (r. 1054–68, ca. 1069–73, ca. 1077–78). They were all members of the Riurikid—or, more accurately, the Volodimerovichi—family and were grandfather, father, and son respectively.<sup>9</sup> What such a depiction does not convey is the horizontal breadth of the Volodimerovichi family itself, since there are no siblings or in-laws present in this simplified picture, and since this larger, more inclusive family model would challenge the modern conception of medieval families as patrilineal institutions with fixed identities.

As the case of Boris Kolomanovich reveals, families were actually kinship webs that spread horizontally as well as vertically. Marital families were just as

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<sup>8</sup> This map does not attempt to show the borders of these kingdoms, only major cities. Medieval polities did not have well delineated borders and their territorial complexity cannot be represented in conventional ways. Additionally, the names of these polities are as open to discussion as the names of their ruling families. To take just one well-known example, Byzantium would have been described as “Rome” or the “Roman Empire” in contemporary Greek primary sources.

<sup>9</sup> My use of the term Volodimerovichi follows the work of Ostrowski, “Systems of Succession.”

important as natal families in finding allies, and in-laws were often the first, not the second, source of such allies when one competed with one's own natal kin. Thus, while named dynasties like the Volodimerovichi, Piasts, and Árpáds may be referenced for convenience, it is more useful to situate each individual at the center of his or her own web and to track his or her shifting relationships with other family members.

These kinship webs, though, were enormous and often spanned medieval Europe—and beyond. As such they were ineffective as the sole source of identity or support; rather, they served as the base from which subsequent relationships could be built.<sup>10</sup> To create effective alliances, individuals had to select and engage with a subset of that web at various times: the situational kinship network. The purpose of the situational kinship network was to recruit a group of allies, all or most of whom were part of the larger web, to assist in accomplishing a particular goal. Kinship may have been the *sine qua non* for belonging to, or joining, a situational kinship network; but to recruit participants to further a given plan, one had to show that there would be mutual benefit. Such benefits ranged from the very tangible (such as new sources of wealth) to the highly intangible (such as influence in exchange for assistance); in each case, all of the parties involved in a situational kinship network shared a common goal. The situational kinship network might therefore serve to break up one's kinship web for a brief time. With the construction of any situational kinship network, an individual might cast a member of his family as X not Y, so as to engage in conflict with Y (who was no longer part of the family at that moment). Such compartmentalization made it much easier to pursue intra-kin conflicts, which constituted the majority of royal conflicts throughout medieval Europe. Finally, situational kinship networks were creations of the moment. They were not designed to be lasting alliances or to permanently divide kin from kin, but to serve a particular purpose. Once the shared objective of the situational kinship network had been reached (e.g., the particular battle won or city taken), the kinship web was re-woven and new situational kinship networks could be created for a new purpose.<sup>11</sup> Such new situational kinship networks often involved family members who only recently had been on opposite sides of a conflict. The malleability of relationships within the larger kinship web helps to demonstrate the efficacy of situational kinship as a tool for analyzing medieval family interactions—as will be shown in the case study here of Boris Kolomanovich.

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**10** These webs spanned confessional boundaries in the Christian world as well, at least through the twelfth century: Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe*, 47–114.

**11** A larger discussion of situational kinship networks forms part of my forthcoming book, *Ties of Kinship*.

## Family and Identity

Identity politics—specifically those related to the privileging of a group’s shared identity in order to create or increase a sense of group unity—is not just a modern phenomenon. The major category of modern discourse for medieval royalty is the dynasty. However, as noted above, when traced solely patrilineally this represents an ahistorical approach to the everyday interconnectivity of the medieval world displayed here. In recent decades, the study of the medieval world has evolved to include women, and has especially privileged the roles of elite women.<sup>12</sup> But even with that advance, the modern historiographical conception of the medieval family is still arranged around a patrilineal line, and children are designated as part of their father’s line solely. This leads, ultimately, to an easy identification of family/dynasty with nation—and anachronism creeps back into the picture. Instead, it must be remembered that medieval ruling families created and maintained power by forging relationships that stretched across and beyond Europe, constrained by religion (sometimes) and politics, but not by modern boundaries read back into history.<sup>13</sup> The result was a tangled web of relations from which it was, and is, impossible to extract a single individual or to tell a single story. This very complexity is useful for illustrating the realities of medieval kinship.

In the example used here, Boris, the son of Koloman, was the progeny of a Volodimerovichi woman and an Árpád man (See Figure 1). Traditionally, for modern historians, he would be labeled an Árpád, thus tracing his line of descent through his father (though there were plenty of contemporary claims being based on matrilineal descent at this same time).<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, one could say that he was half-Volodimerovichi and half-Árpád. And yet the picture is even more complicated than that. Koloman’s father was an Árpád (again, taking his father’s identity as his own, for the sake of discussion), and Koloman’s mother was the daughter of a German count (probably).<sup>15</sup> The father of Boris’s mother, Evfimiia, has been

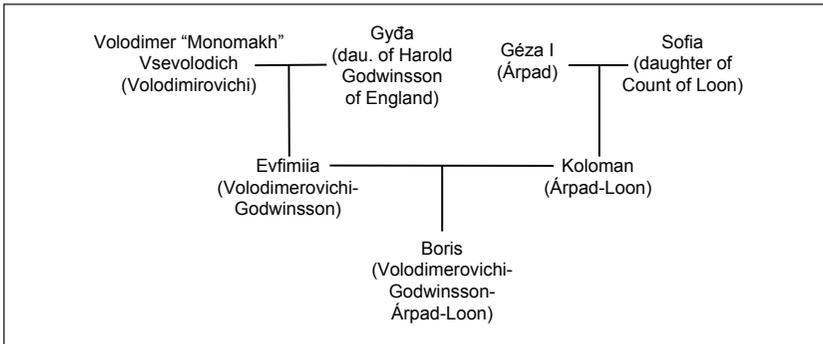
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**12** Two edited collections will point interested readers to some relevant studies: Parsons, *Medieval Queenship*; Goldy and Livingstone, *Writing Medieval Women’s Lives*.

**13** I have shown elsewhere that the traditionally envisioned ecclesiastical divide in medieval Europe did not affect dynastic marriages in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: *Reimagining Europe*, 70–114, 136–85.

**14** The civil war in England between Empress Mathilda and Count Stephen of Blois might be the best known example, as both candidates were claiming the throne through a female connection. In Mathilda’s case, it was herself, as daughter of King Henry I; in Stephen’s, his claim was as the king’s nephew, through his mother, the king’s sister.

**15** There is a great deal of confusion as to the parentage of Koloman and his brother Almos, as they were most likely born prior to the ca. 1075 marriage of their father Geza I and a certain Synadena from Byzantium. Sophia of Loon was, probably, Géza’s first wife, but little is



**Figure 1. Boris's Ancestors and Their Families**

designated as a member of the Volodimerovichi (with the same caveat above), and her mother was Gyða, daughter of Harold Godwinsson, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England.<sup>16</sup> The picture only gets more complicated as one goes back in time and tries to trace the “identity” of each of these individuals. Modern discussions of these families are often distilled into “lines” for convenience but also to privilege the identity of the patrilineal family. For example, the Árpád line, with all children born to an Árpád father and labeled as Árpáds, can be abstracted from this web and equated with “Hungary.”<sup>17</sup> But the picture in Figure 1 is much more complex, and in that complexity is buried a host of competing identities that each individual could adopt and exploit over his or her lifetime.

Anachronism must be dealt with when discussing these various family lines. Often these are not solely modern creations: often they are later medieval constructions that get read back into earlier periods and accepted by later historians. To take just one example, the royal family of the kingdom of Rus’ is known in modern historiography as the Riurikids, named after the eponymous (but mythical) founder of the dynasty, a ninth-century Viking warrior who was allegedly invited to take control of the lawless people of what would become Rus’.<sup>18</sup> In other words,

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known about her. The best source for the Árpád genealogy does not even mention her: Mór, *Az Árpádok*.

**16** See the entries for Boris Kolomanovich, Evfimiia Vladimirovna, and others on “Russian Genealogy” <genealogy.obdurodon.org> (accessed April 26, 2015).

**17** Most any study focused on one particular medieval kingdom or family does this, wittingly or otherwise. For the Árpád example, see the otherwise excellent book by Engel, *Realm of St. Stephen*.

**18** The story of Riurik’s arrival and the foundation of Rus’ is told in *Russian Primary Chronicle*, CE 862.

Riurik is a convenient historical invention designed to legitimize a dynasty, but only at a much later point in time. So the Riurikid name is an anachronism in our period but has continued to be used by historians, as it has become a commonplace descriptor for this family.<sup>19</sup> The members of this family, in the period with which I am concerned, all self-consciously traced their descent not to Riurik, but to Volodimer Sviatoslavich, the first Christian ruler of Rus'. As such, I have used the descriptor "Volodimerovichi" for this group, as it more accurately reflects how they thought of themselves.<sup>20</sup> Though this is just one example, the same discussion can be had for each of the other groups mentioned here,<sup>21</sup> leaving us with an equal number of problems with attempts to use dynasties as building-blocks of medieval politics as with the anachronistic reliance on retroactive kingdoms.

### **A Reconstructed Life of Boris Kolomanovich**

As already noted, the life of Boris Kolomanovich does not conform to many of the normative categories of medieval or modern historiographies, and therefore seems very odd. However, for the purposes of illustrating the dynamics of situational kinship ties within a larger kinship web—as well as for breaking down notions of medieval European history as the history of modern nations read back into the past—it is ideal. Below I offer a sketch of Boris's life derived from a variety of sources, in an effort to identify the kinship web(s) within which he figured and to show how he constructed situational kinship networks as a way to advance his individual goals. Implicit in this story of one man is a larger lesson: that the linear story of one nation or kingdom cannot contain the manifold actors and events that are relevant to the history of that kingdom.

#### ***Boris's Parentage and Childhood***

Boris's father was Koloman, son of Géza I, *pater familias* of the Árpád family and king of the Hungarians (Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> Koloman ruled from his capital at Esztergom on the Danube, and his realm was a powerful one, negotiating its difficult position between the German and Byzantine empires by building a web of relations that

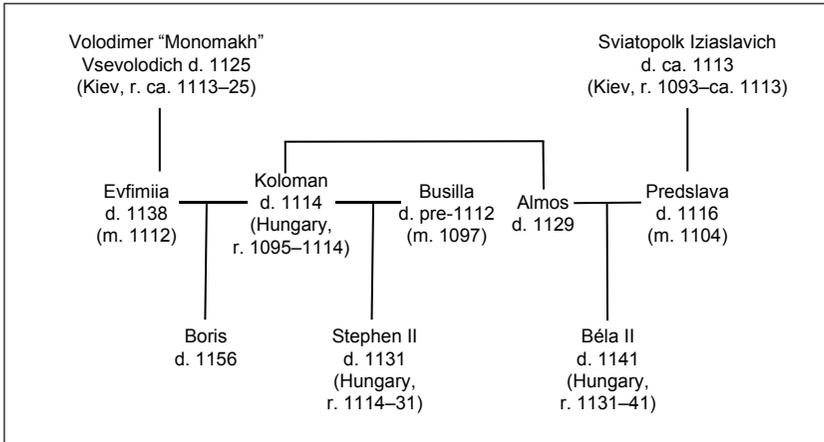
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**19** The genealogical study of the dynasty by Baumgarten (1927) is still extensively cited: "Généalogies et mariages occidentaux."

**20** This follows the work of Ostrowski, "Systems of Succession."

**21** Both Piast and Árpád were eponymous founders of their respective dynasties, for example.

**22** There is some dispute about Boris's parentage, in particular from the one source praising his opponents and rivals; but most sources identify him as the son of Koloman. See *Chro-*



**Figure 2. Boris's Immediate Natal Family**

encompassed most of the European ruling families. Boris's mother was Evfimiia, daughter of Volodimer "Monomakh," one of the most senior (and powerful) members of the Volodimerovichi clan of Rus'; and at the time of Evfimiia's marriage to Koloman in 1112, Volodimer was heir apparent to the throne of Kiev, capital of Rus' (Figure 2).<sup>23</sup> As of 1113, Volodimer Monomakh became the ruler of Kiev and thus controlled Rus', from the territory of Novgorod in the north to the frontier with the steppe a few days south of Kiev, and from beyond Vladimir in the west, to an ever-expanding border in the east: the largest territorial kingdom in Europe at this time.

These were powerful parents, from powerful families, and the circumstances of his birth should have laid the foundation for a highly privileged life for Boris. But beyond the power these families exercised lies a complex story about the nature of dynastic marriages and the politics involved. Koloman had been married previously, to Busilla, the daughter of the Norman ruler of Sicily, Roger I.<sup>24</sup> Busilla had died shortly before 1112, along with their firstborn son, Ladislaus.<sup>25</sup> Koloman had

*nica de gestis Hungarorum*, 132; Cosmas of Prague, "Cosmae Chronicon Boemorum," CE 1132; and Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:21. For two analyses of this marriage and its sources, see Rozanov, "Evfimiia Vladimirovna i Boris Kolomanovich"; and Raffensperger, *Ties of Kinship* (forthcoming).

**23** *Ipat'evskaia letopis*, ed. by Koshelev (hereafter cited as *Hypatian Chronicle*), CE 1112.

**24** The name of Roger's daughter is unknown, but she has historically been referred to as Busilla or Buxilla; see Mór, *Az Árpádok*, 222. Makk has recently suggested that her name was Felicia: *Árpáds and the Comneni*, 126.

**25** Mór, *Az Árpádok*, 222.

one remaining son from his marriage to Busilla, Stephen (later Stephen II), but he also had a power-hungry younger brother, Almos, who had a son of his own, Béla (later Béla II). Koloman and Almos had sparred for much of Koloman's rule, and Koloman may have been concerned about the succession of his line over Almos's. To address this, he arranged another marriage for himself with the daughter of Volodimer Monomakh to create a powerful kinship tie, as well as to produce heirs. This kinship tie worked to offset that of Almos, who was married to another of the Volodimerovichi, the daughter of Sviatopolk Iziaslavich, then ruler of Kiev and Volodimer Monomakh's chief rival in Rus' (see Figure 2). Thus, even prior to his birth, Boris was already embroiled in this web of kinship connections, the product of a marriage arranged to tie one branch of the Árpáds to one branch of the Volodimerovichi, in order to oppose another branch of the Árpáds tied to another branch of the Volodimerovichi.

Shortly before Boris's birth in 1113, Koloman repudiated Evfimiia and she was sent home to Rus', where Boris was born.<sup>26</sup> Though there has been some speculation about the reasons for the repudiation, notably that Koloman must have denied fathering the child, multiple sources record that Boris's father was Koloman.<sup>27</sup> Boris certainly identified himself as such throughout his life, and his main goal was to succeed his father as ruler of the Árpádan realm of Hungary. Nevertheless, Koloman's repudiation of Evfimiia, and the failure of that marriage alliance, led Koloman to take more drastic steps to preserve his rule and promote that of his son Stephen. In 1113, the same year as the repudiation, Koloman had his brother Almos and his nephew Béla blinded, castrated, and committed to a monastery.<sup>28</sup> Each of these actions individually would have made Almos and Béla ineligible for rule, and their combination was strategically potent. Blinding was a well-known punishment, especially in the Roman world of Constantinople, and was used as a humane way to punish usurpers without killing them.<sup>29</sup> The removal of their eyes signaled that they were no longer bodily whole and were thus incapable of rule. Castration meanwhile, was intended to prevent them from producing heirs to their line.<sup>30</sup>

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**26** *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 132.

**27** Cosmas of Prague, "Cosmae Chronicon Boemorum," CE 1132; and Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:21. For the allegation of adultery, see *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 132.

**28** *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 133; Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle of the Czechs*, book 3:43; "Annales Posonienses," CE 1117. John Kinnamos mentions blinding as a tool of the Hungarians in regard to Almos, in particular, but there is no mention of the castration: *Deeds*, book 1:9. Béla remained at the Benedictine monastery of Pécsvárad even after his father went to Byzantium: Urbansky, *Byzantium and the Danube Frontier*, 40.

**29** Lascaratos and Marketos, "Penalty of Blinding."

**30** *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum* (133) records that the man ordered to castrate the young

Committing a rival, especially a younger brother, to a monastery also had a long heritage in medieval Europe, with Pepin the Short's treatment of the Merovingians in the eighth century as perhaps the most famous example. Despite these tactics' apparent lack of success in this case, since Béla eventually did succeed to the throne and produce offspring, these actions had enormous symbolic value that would have cast doubt upon Almos and Béla and also required them, or their chroniclers, to explain away these actions.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the punishments themselves speak to the strength of Koloman's resolve to preserve the inheritance for his son Stephen, and his line in the face of a rival younger brother. His first attempt to preserve his family's rule had been to craft a marital alliance, while his second attempt was maiming his own close kin, a clear statement of the relative importance of marital alliances versus that of blood relations.

At Koloman's death Stephen II, his son by Busilla, succeeded him. Stephen, too, was worried about Almos and Béla, despite his father's efforts, and so he worked to neutralize Almos's alliance with the Volodimerovichi. He did this by repeatedly creating situational kinship networks with Almos's brother-in-law Iaroslav Sviatopolchich against Volodimer Monomakh, themselves antagonistic kin.<sup>32</sup> In this way he fostered goodwill with the family of Sviatopolk Iziaslavich (a key figure in Almos's kinship web) and prevented Almos from calling on this connection to create a situational kinship network to use against Stephen. It is also possible to imagine that Volodimer Monomakh's position as Evfimiia's father lent another motive to Stephen's attacks upon him. In fact, the *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum* specifically ascribes to Stephen this motive for supporting Iaroslav: "King Stephen, wishing to avenge the injury done to his father, King Coloman, promised the Duke his assistance."<sup>33</sup>

Stephen was right to be worried about Almos, but it seems that his strategic counter-alliance with the Volodimerovichi had worked in his favor, since when Almos next revolted against him in 1125, he did so by drawing on a different section of his kinship web and fleeing to Constantinople, where he received help from Emperor John II Komnenos—and not from his wife's kin in Rus'. Emperor John II

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Béla was unable to bring himself to do so, and instead gave the king a dog's testicles in place of the young boy's.

**31** Ibid.

**32** There are multiple examples of Hungarian support for Iaroslav in the various chronicles; see, e.g., the *Hypatian Chronicle*, CE 1118 and 1123. Volodimer Monomakh was also the father of Evfimiia, Stephen's former stepmother, though whether this played into his calculations or not is unknown. It is, perhaps, hard to imagine that it did not play some role in his thinking.

**33** *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 134.

was himself married to an Árpád princess, the daughter of Koloman's predecessor Ladislaus, and Almos utilized this tie to create a situational kinship network with him.<sup>34</sup> The two, John and Almos, fought with Stephen II several times at the end of the 1120s, until Almos's death in 1129,<sup>35</sup> which brought an end to the conflict. Béla had, it appears, stayed in one monastery or another without leaving the kingdom the whole time, which is where he was found by Stephen II and named as heir in 1131, shortly before Stephen's death.<sup>36</sup> Though we have no source that explains this choice, Stephen had no sons of his own, and it appears that he would rather have his cousin (though son of his mutinous uncle) as his heir, rather than his own repudiated half-brother Boris. Indeed, this succession may have prompted Boris's initial campaign to gain the throne of Hungary.

### ***Boris Attempts to Claim His Birthright***

It has been assumed that Boris spent his childhood in Rus' with his mother;<sup>37</sup> but he does not appear in any contemporary sources until the early 1130s, and when he does appear, it is as a fully grown political actor. The succession of Béla II to the Árpáadian throne was a slight to Boris as the son of Koloman, and this most likely motivated his first attempt to claim it for himself in 1132, when he was eighteen or nineteen years old.<sup>38</sup> Boris's bid for power was directly preceded by the extension of his kinship web: at some point prior to that year, he had married Judith, the daughter of the Piast ruler of Poland, Bolesław III (See Figure 3).<sup>39</sup> This created a

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**34** Kinnamos, *Deeds*, book 1:9. Niketas Choniates also discusses these events, though with less specificity: *Historia*, c. 17. John II Komnenos was married to Piroška/Irene, the daughter of Ladislaus; Ladislaus had been Koloman's uncle and predecessor. See Mór, *Az Árpádok*, 210–12; Magdalino, "Empire of the Komnenoi," 631.

**35** *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 135; Magdalino, "Empire of the Komnenoi," 631; Magoulis, in Chomiates, *Historia*, n. 43.

**36** *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 135; Engel, *Realm of St. Stephen*, 50.

**37** Rozanov, "Evmiia Vladimirovna i Boris Kolomanovich," 587.

**38** The general practice of the Árpáds had been lateral, or collateral, succession with only a few deviations (or attempted deviations); thus Koloman's children should all have ruled before the succession passed to Koloman's younger brother's family. John Kinnamos discusses the inheritance system of the Árpáds, specifically noting it as lateral, when he discusses the inheritance of Géza II: *Deeds*, book 5:1. It is also worth noting, as motivation, the killing of the nobles who had supported the blinding of Béla: a deed ascribed to his wife Elena, and which the *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum* (136–37) cites as the cause of the Hungarian nobles' invitation to Boris in the first place.

**39** The "*Velikaia Khronika*" o Pol'she, hereafter cited as *Polish "Great Chronicle"* (ed. Shchavelva, trans. Popov, c. 27) records that one of Bolesław's daughters married a son of Koloman.

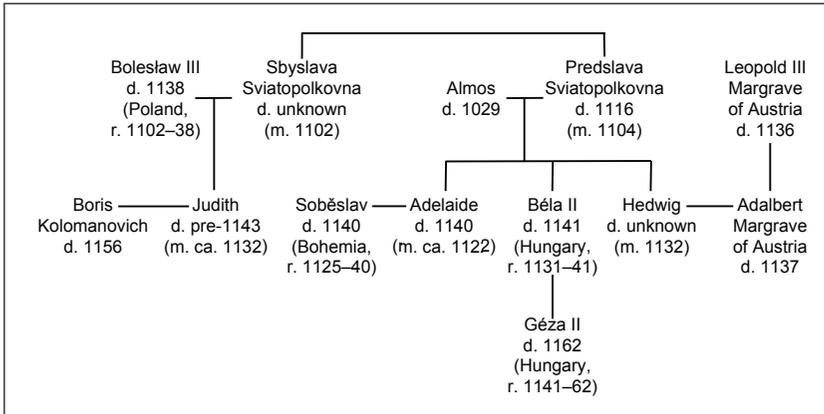


Figure 3. Boris's Allies and Enemies in 1132

new opportunity for further situational kinship alliances, to support the claim for what he apparently viewed as his natal rights. This dynastic marriage itself was a departure for Bolesław in terms of familial relationships, as his first wife had been a daughter of Sviatopolk Iziaslavich, a sister of Almos's wife Predslava; he was thus the uncle of Boris's rival cousin, Béla II (Figure 3).<sup>40</sup> Such a change illustrates the complicated nature of situational kinship networks, as well as Bolesław's apparent acceptance of Boris's birthright, and his claim to the Hungarian throne.<sup>41</sup> The kinship web that encompassed Bolesław (and all medieval rulers) connected him to a host of mutually antagonistic people and causes. Family ties, because of this, did not mean a guarantee of immediate assistance. Instead, they were often simply the foundation for requesting assistance, and were superseded by the active construction of situational kinship networks to create alliances for a particular cause. Situational kinship networks allowed for a medieval realpolitik in which brothers-in-law might support each other in one campaign, but find themselves on opposite sides of another campaign a few years later, while all along being part of the same

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Balzer in his *Genealogia Piastów* (Table 3) has subsequently suggested that this was instead Géza II, son of Béla II. However, the majority of sources that discuss Géza II only mention his marriage to Evfrosiniia Mstislavna (one of the Volodimerovichi), and all of his known children are assumed to be hers. Thus, we are left with a historical conundrum due to a lack of specific evidence. Mór (*Az Árpádok*, 257–80) discusses this marriage as at least a possibility.

<sup>40</sup> *Lavrent'evskaia letopis'*, edited by Koshelev (hereafter cited as *Laurentian Chronicle*), CE 1102. See also Długosz, *Annales seu cronicae incliti*, 210–11.

<sup>41</sup> It should also be acknowledged that while Bolesław's motives are unknown, his actions indicate his acceptance of Boris's claims, if only to advance his own agenda.

kinship web. Bolesław understood that by marrying his daughter to Boris, he was choosing a side against Béla II and potentially involving himself, his family, and his kingdom in a war for the Hungarian throne. This was not an uncommon position for the Piasts to be in: Bolesław III and his Piast predecessors had already demonstrated ambitions to influence the Árpád succession.<sup>42</sup>

Béla II responded by activating a situational kinship network of his own. He called upon his brother-in-law Soběslav, the Přemyslid ruler of the Bohemians, who was married to Adelheid, Béla's sister (See Figure 3).<sup>43</sup> Soběslav had inherited the throne in 1125 but had had an eventful life of struggle before that, with his older brother Vladislav. That struggle was often supported by Bolesław III,<sup>44</sup> who was Soběslav's nephew and cousin.<sup>45</sup> This was an odd change of kinship allegiances for Soběslav and reflects the utility of situational kinship networks, as opposed to the static, linear relationships reflected in genealogical charts. Béla, like Boris, also expanded his kinship web, marrying his other sister, Hedwig, to Adalbert, the son of Margrave Leopold III of Austria (see Figure 3).<sup>46</sup> This new relationship tied Béla into the powerful Babenberg family of Leopold III and allowed him to create situational kinship networks not just with Adalbert but with other members of that larger kinship web.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, 1132 saw the clash between these two situational kinship networks: Bolesław III and his son-in-law Boris led an army against Béla II for control of the Árpáadian kingdom. Béla's allies included his new brothers-in-law as well as other

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**42** Bolesław's namesake, Bolesław II, had done the same, backing one line of the Árpáds against another in a succession battle during the second half of the eleventh century.

**43** Soběslav's role seems to have been an offensive one, attacking the Poles from the west while they were occupied with the Hungarians to their south. See Cosmas of Prague, "Cosmae Chronicon Boemorum," 216; and "Annales Cracovienses Breves," CE 1133. For the marriage, see Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle*, book 3:52.

**44** One of the highlights of which is the appeal that Bolesław writes to one uncle/cousin (Vladislav) on behalf of another uncle/cousin (Soběslav). See Cosmas of Prague, *Chronicle*, book 3:41.

**45** Vratislav II of Bohemia had a daughter Judith by his first wife (an Árpád), who was married to Władysław Herman of Poland, Bolesław III's father. Vratislav II had Soběslav, and his elder brother Vladislav, by his second wife (a Piast and Władysław Herman's sister). Cosmas of Prague, Prague, *Chronicle*, book 2:20. This complicated scenario is not depicted in Figure 2 or elsewhere in this article.

**46** Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:21.

**47** *Ibid.* It should also be noted that there were additional positive outcomes for Béla, including building an alliance with the rulers in Austria, with whom he shared a border; allowing him to defeat Bolesław III's gambit to gain more power over the Hungarians; and allowing him to build a closer relationship with Emperor Lothar III.

members of his kinship web.<sup>48</sup> The details of the battle are few, but the contemporary chronicler Otto of Freising records that it ended in Boris and Bolesław's flight, losing many men in the process.<sup>49</sup> This one battle would also bring an end to Boris's first attempt on the Hungarian throne, as the German emperor, Lothar III, intervened to negotiate an armistice between the sides at Merseburg, which also effectively ended Bolesław III's support of Boris's claim.<sup>50</sup> One can speculate that Lothar III did this because the wide-ranging conflict had involved two Árpáds, the Piast and Přemyslid rulers, and many of his own German nobles.<sup>51</sup> This level of involvement was the almost inevitable result of the kinship webs that underlay the family dynamics of medieval elites. When situational kinship networks were activated, as in this instance, they could still span several kingdoms and traditional dynasties. And though such conflict could be contained, in that it included only a subset of a larger kinship web, it had the potential to draw in more and more people if it progressed—hence Lothar III's intervention and the relatively short campaigns that traditionally accompanied such conflicts.

Boris does not appear to have renewed his claim again during Béla II's reign, but he did continue to expand his kinship web, notably by marrying a relative of Emperor John II Komnenos, prior to the Byzantine emperor's death in 1143.<sup>52</sup> While this marriage represents a renewal of the Árpád-Komneni ties mentioned above (which had also been instrumental to Almos), it did not serve an immediate purpose in Boris's quest to reach the Hungarian throne. Indeed, Boris is absent not just because the focus of the sources was trained elsewhere, but because of the nature of his campaigns to gain the throne. Boris did not have much support from within the Árpád kingdom, and he required outside assistance in each of his attempts. In part, this is because he had little support or visibility within the Árpád kingdom. Though Otto of Freising records that Hungarian nobles had invited him to make his first attempt on the throne in 1132, they disappear quickly from the account, and the focus is on Boris and Bolesław III.<sup>53</sup> Boris's most potent allies, as we have seen, came from elsewhere in Europe and were the product of Boris's

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**48** Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:21. It is also useful to recognize that Bishop Otto was also the son of Margrave Leopold, and thus linked to these events personally: Mierow's n. 105 in this translation.

**49** Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:21, sec. 21.

**50** Poole, "Germany," 345.

**51** *Ibid.*

**52** Kinnamos, *Deeds*, books 3:11 and 1:10. What happened to Boris's Piast wife, Judith, is unknown.

**53** Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:21.

use of situational kinship networks to assist him. Moreover, the various conflicts that were raging across Europe during this decade prevented him from capitalizing on any of the relationships in his kinship web. The German empire descended into war soon after Lothar III negotiated the peace at Merseburg, with Lothar and many of his nobles campaigning against Roger II of Sicily; after Lothar's death in 1137, the empire descended into civil war.<sup>54</sup> The Piasts were similarly disarrayed after Bolesław III's death in 1138, when his sons fought against each other to succeed him.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, Boris's new kinsman John II Komnenos was focused upon his eastern frontier, waging several wars over Antioch and the surrounding area.<sup>56</sup> This removed some of the major possibilities for forging situational kinship networks and further illustrates the fragile nature of the enterprise that Boris had undertaken. It was reliant not only upon constructed kinship networks and the goodwill or avarice of family members, but also upon the political opportunities available in western Eurasia.

### ***Boris's Second Attempt on the Throne***

Boris's marriage to a Komnena was undoubtedly an important part of his kinship web, but his second attempt on the throne of the Árpáds, this time against Béla II's son Géza II, originated not from Komneni territory but from German territory. The situational kinship network that Boris constructed for his attempt in 1146 sheds even more light on the complex family dynamics embedded in the medieval kinship web. In this instance, Boris was supported by the new Přemyslid ruler of the Bohemians, Vladislav II, as well as by Vladislav II's wife Gertrude; whereas in 1132, the Přemyslid ruler Soběslav had opposed him.<sup>57</sup> The intervening decade had not only witnessed a change in rule amongst the Bohemians, from Soběslav to Vladislav II, but also a change in the political calculations of the Přemyslids relative to Boris. The reason for this is not clear, though one might conjecture that Vladislav II, as the son of Soběslav's elder brother and rival Vladislav, was acting to block the interests of a rival branch of his own Přemyslid family.<sup>58</sup> In which case,

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**54** Poole, "Germany," 345–47. Benjamin Arnold discusses the overarching rivalry between Lothar III and Conrad III which occupied much attention throughout the 1130s: "Western Empire."

**55** Polish "*Great Chronicle*", cc. 31, 33. The *Hypatian Chronicle* (CE 1142) mentions the conflict as stemming from the Volodimerovichi support of Władysław. Otto of Freising references it as well: *Deeds*, book 1:30.

**56** Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 378–79.

**57** Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:34.

**58** There was a history of trouble between these families that continued after the death of

Vladislav II's participation in an alliance had little to do with Boris himself but was instead calculated to benefit Vladislav II and harm the supporters of Soběslav, while also helping Boris achieve his goal. For Boris, however, Vladislav's support was crucial, since he needed access to Vladislav's kinship web.

Vladislav II and Gertrude introduced Boris to Emperor Conrad III, Gertrude's brother and founder of the new Hohenstaufen line of German rulers, to whom Boris appealed for assistance (Figure 4).<sup>59</sup> Conrad, swayed by the presence of his sister and brother-in-law (Otto of Freising tells us),<sup>60</sup> agreed to assist Boris in his attempt on the Hungarian throne. The support of Conrad III, combined with that of Vladislav II and Gertrude, was crucial in raising the soldiers necessary for Boris to attack the border fortress of Pressburg, though neither Vladislav II nor Conrad III participated personally in the military conflict.<sup>61</sup> But even more essential than military support was the tacit assistance that tends not to be stressed by chroniclers: the lack of interference from the wide ranging kin network to which Gertrude and Conrad III belonged (see Figure 4). This network allowed Boris largely free rein and helped to mitigate any assistance that Géza II might seek. Boris was also of aid to this network, as he provided a *casus belli* for Henry II, the Babenberg margrave of Austria (and half-brother of Conrad III) with whom the Árpáds shared an uneasy border, to once again go to war against his Hungarian neighbors.<sup>62</sup> Boris thus led a mixed army that included Hungarian adherents of his own, some German nobles, and mercenaries hired by Vladislav II, against the border fortress of Pressburg (Map 1).<sup>63</sup> Boris and his supporters took the fortress, but their victory was short-lived. Géza II led a counterattack, stopping just short of the fortress and bribing Boris's supporters to abandon him.<sup>64</sup> This caused Boris to flee back into

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Soběslav in 1140, when the next ruler was supposed to be Vladislav, son of Soběslav. Instead, Vladislav II, son of Vladislav I, was elected. See Wolverton, *Hastening toward Prague*, 213–14.

**59** Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:34.

**60** *Ibid.*: "Through the intercession of the aforesaid duke of Bohemia [Vladislav] and his wife Gertrude, sister of the king, he obtained the king's promise regarding this matter, ratified by an honorable pledge."

**61** Otto of Freising, *Deeds*, book 1:31 (30).

**62** Henry II's position is even more complex than one can see here, as he was also the brother of Adalbert, husband of Béla II's sister Hedwig. The kinship webs of medieval royals stretched far and wide and inevitably, many of the people with whom one came into conflict were within one's kinship webs. Thus, the creation of situational kinship networks to create networks for conflict management and to erect "firewalls" within kinship webs.

**63** Otto of Freising, *Two Cities*, book 7:34; Otto of Freising, *Deeds*, book 1:31 (30).

**64** *Ibid.*

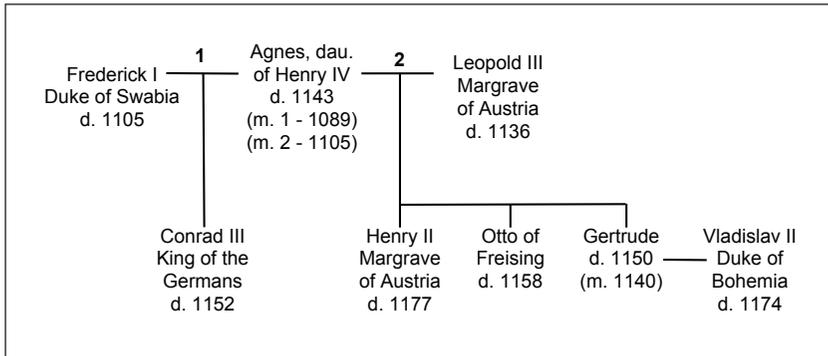


Figure 4. Boris's Allies of 1146 and Their Families<sup>65</sup>

German territory, where Géza subsequently pursued him, and there continued his attack by fighting and defeating Henry II (Figure 4).<sup>66</sup>

In the end, Géza needed no more assistance than his treasury to defeat Boris by bribing his soldiers, but his subsequent actions, including the attack on Henry II after Boris's flight,<sup>67</sup> shows that he understood the extent of the situational kinship network backing Boris—including the role of those members that participated in nonmilitary ways. Following these events, Conrad III also felt the pain of his involvement with Boris, as Géza broke off the marriage agreement previously arranged between Conrad III's son and Géza's sister.<sup>68</sup> Conrad's attempt to go on crusade the next year was also affected by the repercussions of his involvement in Boris's attempt on Géza's throne, since Géza forced Conrad to negotiate the terms of his army's passage through Géza's kingdom.<sup>69</sup> The possible gain to the participants is often what encouraged people to join these situational kinship networks

<sup>65</sup> Henry II, margrave of Austria, is also Henry XI, duke of Bavaria.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Henry is an interesting figure in this regard, as he is half-brother to Conrad III and brother to Otto of Freising. Henry and Conrad III are the main objects of Géza's attack and Boris is not mentioned at all in the two Hungarian sources. See "Annales Posonienses," CE 1145; *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 137–38. Boris, and his claim, may also have been used by Henry XI as a pretext for war against his neighbors; see below.

<sup>67</sup> Otto of Freising, *Deeds*, book 1:31 (30). *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum* (137–38) does not include Boris at all in its account, but focuses on that battle with Henry II and his supporter Conrad III.

<sup>68</sup> Urbansky, *Byzantium and the Danube Frontier*, 69–70.

<sup>69</sup> Berry, "Second Crusade," 483–84. Though Conrad III was delayed by the treaty negotiations with Géza, Géza did end up paying him a substantial amount to guarantee peace, so perhaps it was not entirely a loss for Conrad. See *Chronica de gestis Hungarorum*, 138.

and support a particular cause. But it must also be acknowledged that there were negative costs to these relationships as well.

### ***Boris's Life and Death in Byzantium***

Deprived of further assistance from his allies in the region, Boris turned to his wife's kin in Constantinople. However, getting there involved crossing Géza's kingdom. He succeeded in doing so in the company of Louis VII, the Capetian king of the Franks, who allowed him to come along precisely because of the kinship web that Boris had built. In allowing Boris passage with his army, Louis is recorded to have said that he was doing so because of Boris's marriage to a Komnena.<sup>70</sup> This indicates not a specific relationship with the Capetians, or to Louis's family at all, but it once again emphasizes the importance, not just of specific relationships between individuals (or families), but the larger ramifications of those relationships for others. That tie to the imperial family was important to Louis because of the assistance he knew that he would require from the Komneni once he reached Constantinople, in order to begin his crusade. Thus, Boris's relationship with an entirely different family, from a different region of Europe, created a rationale for the Frankish king's assistance, thereby antagonizing the king of the Hungarians.<sup>71</sup>

Once in Constantinople, Boris furthered the efforts of his wife's cousin, Manuel Komnenos, to overthrow Géza II, or at least to harm him. Manuel was already involved in ongoing hostilities with Géza II, due to Géza's (and his father-in-law Ban Beloš's) inroads into Roman territory in the Balkans. It is unclear whether Manuel ever planned to place Boris on the throne of the Árpáds, but his claim was certainly used to antagonize Géza during their campaigns.<sup>72</sup> For instance, while Géza II was absent from his kingdom in 1151, Manuel led a massive invasion of Hungarian territory, with Boris as part of his entourage.<sup>73</sup> When Géza heard of this attack and returned, Manuel deployed Boris and his soldiers to raid deeper into Hungarian territory, drawing Géza away from Manuel's forces. The Byzantine chronicler John Kinnamos records that Géza chased Boris more because of his identity as a rival, than because of the damage that he was doing.<sup>74</sup> Boris's partici-

**70** Odo of Deuil, *De profectioe Ludovici VII*, 2:35–39. It is also possible that Vratislav II's presence in Louis's entourage was helpful in gaining Boris a place. See Otto of Freising and his continuator, Rahewin: *Deeds*, book 1:42.

**71** Odo of Deuil, *De profectioe Ludovici VII*, 2:35–39.

**72** Kinnamos, *Deeds*, book 3:11.

**73** *Ibid.*

**74** *Ibid.* Paul Stephenson suggests that Boris was specifically used to goad Géza into a pitched battle: *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 230.

pation in this engagement, then, was due to his situational kinship network with Manuel: and while it probably cannot be construed as a concerted attempt to take control of the Árpádián realm, Boris may have thought otherwise.

It was the same kind of conflict with Géza II, with Boris in Manuel's army, which brought Boris's life to a close. In 1156, with Géza II and Manuel negotiating along the Danube,<sup>75</sup> Boris led a campaign of raids into Hungarian territory, where he was killed by a Cuman arrow—though it is unclear (ironically) which army this Turkic mercenary was supporting.<sup>76</sup>

Boris's death (at the age of 43) brought an end to his personal struggle for the throne of the Árpáds, but it coincided with the arrival in Byzantium of more claimants to that throne. Around 1157, Manuel Komnenos married his niece Maria to Stephen, Géza II's own brother and rival, who had just fled to Byzantium looking for assistance. Manuel's extension of his kinship web to these new Árpád exiles, Stephen and his brother Ladislaus, gave him options for creating new and more effective situational kinship networks to utilize against Géza II. This might also call into question the motive of the Cuman who killed Boris: was he working for Géza II or Manuel Komnenos? In the final analysis, all of these actors shared a kinship web, but with whom they chose to make situational kinship networks was a shifting proposition, one that did not favor Boris Kolomanovich in the long term.

### **Conclusion—and Suggestions for a New Historical Methodology**

The story of Boris Kolomanovich could simply be that of one man attempting to claim a throne, and subsumed within the frame of Hungarian history. But, as shown here, it actually gives us a window into a much larger world. It also allows us to challenge some of the traditional ideas about family organization and identity that have structured the discourse of medieval history for generations. But where does all of this leave us in our investigation and what paths forward does it offer?

One conclusion that can be drawn from this story is that the current way of writing medieval European history, exemplified here by the history of eastern Europe, is insufficient and inaccurate. Writing a history of "Hungary," even while taking account of "foreign" interactions and affairs, cannot accurately represent the ways and the extent to which the elites of the medieval world were interconnected. The path forward then is to begin to think and write about any and all

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**75** Kinnamos, *Deeds*, book 3:19.

**76** Otto of Freising, *Deeds*, book 2:52. It is unclear simply from the text for whom the Cumans were working as mercenaries. Urbansky suggests that the Cumans were in the pay of Géza II, rather than the Byzantines: *Byzantium and the Danube Frontier*, 80–81.

medieval territories without modern nations read back in time, and with medieval political boundaries only tentatively outlined. The peregrinations of medieval people were not limited to those of traveling merchants but were part of elite life as well, and placing firm boundaries around a kingdom is a modern phenomenon rather than a medieval one. A new type of medieval political history would begin with an acknowledgement that there *were* medieval borders—but historians would need to be willing to follow the stories and the characters wherever they might lead.

Another possible path forward, demonstrated here, is to focus on families and their relationships to these territories while avoiding the common tendency to substitute the ruling family (the Árpáds in this case) for a nation or kingdom (Hungary) so that the anachronistic situation discussed above is replicated. One corrective to this, suggested here, would be to focus on situational kinship networks and their effects on identity. Boris Kolomanovich seems to have altered his identity several times during his lifetime, to best take advantage of the opportunities afforded by these networks. He emphasized his marital relationships when he needed assistance from his father-in-law Bolesław III, as well as when seeking support from his cousins-in-law, the Komeneni, or even when gaining safe passage from Louis VII. But he emphasized his natal relations when attempting to motivate supporters within Hungarian territory, both in 1132 and 1146. Due to such complexities, it would be difficult to label Boris as Árpád, Volodimerovichi, Piast, or Komneni throughout his life. Instead, he was enmeshed in a kinship web wherein he had access to each of those identities, and possibly more, and was able to identify as each situationally, in pursuit of his goal. The resulting situational kinship networks which Boris created allowed him to attempt to claim the crown of the Árpáds, but they also reveal a new way to look at the complicated kinship webs of medieval politics that is broadly applicable across the medieval globe.

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**Christian Raffensperger** (craffensperger@wittenberg.edu) focuses on the study of Rus' in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and its place within Europe. He has authored articles that have appeared, or will appear, in journals such as *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, *Medieval Prosopography*, *Imenoslov*, *Byzantinische Forschungen*, and *Russian Review*; and in edited collections such as *Writing Medieval Women's Lives*. His book, *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus' in the Medieval World* (2012) situates Rus' firmly within the boundaries of Europe and uses dynastic marriage, trade, and religious ties to demonstrate that Rus' was not part of a Byzantine commonwealth or Eastern "Other," but an integral part of medieval Europe. His next book, *Ties of Kinship: Rusian Genealogy and Dynastic Marriage*, will be released in the fall of 2015 and is part genealogy and part analysis of the dynastic marriages made by the Rusian ruling family, the Volodimerovichi, over the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This project has a parallel online digital humanities component that may be accessed at <genealogy.obdurodon.org>. Raffensperger graduated from Bates College in Lewiston and received his MA and PhD from the University of Chicago. He is currently Associate Professor of History at Wittenberg University in Ohio, and an associate of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

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**Abstract** The politics of kinship and of monarchy in medieval eastern Europe are typically constructed within the framework of the modern nation-state, read back into the past. The example of Boris Kolomanovich, instead, highlights the horizontal interconnectivity of medieval Europe and its neighbors and demonstrates the malleability of individual identity within kinship webs, as well as the creation of situational kinship networks to advance individuals' goals.

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**Keywords** kinship, identity, dynastic marriage, medieval Europe, Hungary, Rus'.