

# Russian archaeological find solves 13th-century mystery

August 24 2017

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Rescue archaeology work conducted in the city centre of Yaroslavl prior to installing a new sewer system has turned up an ancient leaden seal from the turn of the 13th century. It once belonged to the spouse of Vladimir Grand-Prince Constantine Vsevolodovich and the mother of the first Grand-Prince of Yaroslavl. Thanks to this find, we finally know the name of the Grand-Duchess—her name was Maria.

"In Ancient Rus, everyone in a position of authority—Grand-Princes and Princesses, and the upper ranks of the clergy—had their own seal, which was affixed to all official documents and decrees. We have several thousand such seals from the pre-Mongolian era—but to find one with a female owner is very remarkable indeed. Scientists are only aware of a few dozen examples," said Dr. Pyotr Gaidukov, Deputy director of the Institute of Archaeology.

Dr. Gaidukov is a leading authority on stamps and seals of Ancient Rus, and is responsible for the attribution of the latest find.

The seal was found in Yaroslavl during preliminary work for putting through a new sewerage system to the Metropolitan bishop Chambers (Mitropolichy Palaty)—the oldest structure in the city. Yaroslavl's city centre has only recently marked its thousandth anniversary—it is a Federal-level Heritage Site that also falls under UNESCO Heritage Protection.

This special status means that any building work in the centre of the city

must first undergo archaeological inspection.

This find is of major significance. The team of archaeologists led by Dr. Asya Engovatova has not only uncovered the seal itself, but many fragments of imported glassware vessels, and even the remains of a wooden building that would have been exceptionally large for the 12th and 13th centuries.

The finds give archaeologists grounds to believe that near the Metropolitan Chambers—themselves dating from the 17th century—there must have stood the famous Prince's Court of Vsevolod Constantinovich, first Prince of Yaroslavl, who was slain in battle in 1238 in the legendary battle against Mongolian warlord Batu-Khan at the River Sit.

The leaden seal was found in good condition, close to the foundations of this wooden building—and bearing the images of Saints Constantine and Maria. It was found in a cultural layer reliably datable to the turn of the 13th century.

Dr. Gaidukov explained that royal seals in 12th and 13th-century Russia usually bore the images of their owner's patron saints, from which the rulers took their own forenames. The fact that this seal shows both a male and female saint means that it had belonged to a royal princess, since the other saint's image referred to her husband.

"The exact dating of this seal, along with its place of discovery, gives us near-certain grounds for saying it belonged to the wife of Vladimir Grand-Prince Constantine Vsevolodovich (1186-1218)," Dr. Gaidukov said.

Constantine Vsevolodovich was the eldest son of Vladimir Grand-Prince Vsevolod Yurievich the Big-Nest. He ruled throughout Rostov and

Novgorod, and by the end of his life had become Grand-Prince of Vladimir. His son, Vsevolod Constantinovich, became the first appointed Prince of Yaroslavl—where he ruled from 1210 to 1238. His own royal seal was found close to the Metropolitan Chambers in 2010.

The name of his mother—the wife of Prince Constantine Vsevolodovich—and daughter of Smolensk Prince Mstislav Romanovich, remained a mystery until now. All that was known of her was that after her husband's death, she had taken the veil under the new name of Agafya (Agatha).

"However, the image of St. Maria (St. Mary) on her seal proves that her baptismal name was Maria. At long last, the mystery princess has got her name back," Dr. Gaidukov said. "This type of leaden seal was essential for a ruler—it gave authority to all legal documents, such as those which confirmed the ownership of land. A Duchess who had her own such seal automatically had the right to grant property rights in her own name."

Dr. Gaidukov concluded by stressing that the find of such an important seal sheds light on the legal status of woman in pre-Mongolian Russia.

Provided by Russian Academy of Sciences

Citation: Russian archaeological find solves 13th-century mystery (2017, August 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-08-russian-archaeological-13th-century-mystery.html>

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