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“YE-LIE-BAN, RULER OF THE RUSSIAN TRIBE”: AN EXPLANATION FOR THE CHINESE TERM TO DESIGNATE A RUS’ RULER RECORDED IN THE YUAN SHI

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Abstract. Objective: An attempt is made to explain the identity of “The Rus’ tribe’s ruler, Ye-lie-ban,” described in the Chinese-language primary sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Departing from past attempts to connect this figure to Yuri II of Vladimir or any individual at all, this article presents the argument that Ye-lie-ban originally referred to the city of Ryazan.

Research materials: Primary sources were used, foremost among them the biographies of Subutai in the Yuan Shi (chapters 121 and 122), other sections of the Yuan Shi, Su Tianjue’s Yuanchao mingchen shilüe, the Novgorod First and Galician-Volhynian Chronicles, the Secret History of the Mongols, and Rashid-al Din’s Compendium of Chronicles. Secondary literature by leading figures in the field of Mongol history and nineteenth and early twentieth-century Chinese and French literature were consulted.

Research results and novelty: It is argued here that Ye-lie-ban was an attempt to render the name of Ryazan in Mongolian, recorded by Rashid al-Din as “Irezan.” During the process of translation from Mongolian to Chinese or during copying that resulted in the creation of Sübe’etei’s biography in various recensions that have come down to our time, the East Asian author/scribe(s) were simply uncertain what the “Irezan” captured by Batu’s forces was. It appears that “Ye-lie-zan” (Irezan = Ryazan) was mistakenly altered to Ye-lie-ban at some early point in the creation of materials that resulted in Subutai’s biography, being described as an individual ruler rather than a city. Other unambiguous transcriptions of Ryazan in the Yuan Dynasty’s literature serve to corroborate this identification.

Keywords: Mongol invasion of Russia, Batu, Subutai, Ryazan, Yuan Shi, Ye-lie-ban, Rus’ Chronicles, Mongol Empire, Mongol invasion of Europe

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The Question of Yelieban's Identity

There has been some scholarly discussion and much uncertainty surrounding a mysterious Rus' figure whose defeat and capture by the Mongols during the Great Western Campaign of Batu (1236–1242) is detailed in the two largely duplicate biographies of Subutai [Sübe'etei] found in the *Yuan Shi* and in a third version of the biography recorded in Su Tianjue's *Yuanchao mingchen shilüe* 元朝名臣事略 (*Lives of Eminent Ministers of the Yuan*). That third version originates from a temple stele biography composed by Wang Yun (王惲, 1228–1304). The biography in all its versions briefly describes Batu's successful campaign of conquest against the Rus' which in fact took place in a flurry of destruction in 1237–38 and resumed in 1239–40, culminating with the sack of Kiev. Few of those details are recognizable in the Chinese biography accounts which are obscure and succinct. Evidently all surviving versions of Subutai's biography originate from the same basic source material. It names a Rus' ruler who was defeated: "The Rus' tribe's ruler, **Ye-lie-ban**" [兀魯思部主也烈班]. There is some variation in how this name is rendered between texts, perhaps reflecting the usage of original Mongolian material as the source earliest created in the compositional history of the biography. For comparison, see the table below:

<i>Yuan Shi</i> juan 121 (Biography of Subutai 速不台) [17, p. 62–64]	<i>Yuan Shi</i> juan 122 (Biography of Xuebutai 雪不台) [17, p. 72]	<i>Yuanchao mingchen shilüe</i> (Biography of Subutai 速不台) [20, p. 25]
辛丑，太宗命諸王拔都等討兀魯思部主 也烈班 ，為其所敗，圍禿里思哥城，不克。拔都奏遣速不台督戰，[...]一戰獲 也烈班 。進攻禿里思哥城，三日克之，盡取兀魯思所部而還。	是年詔宗王拔都西征，雪不台為先鋒，戰大捷。十三年，討兀魯思部主 野力班 ，禽之。	辛丑，諸王拔都征兀魯思，為所敗，奏遣公督戰，遂擒兀魯思王 也烈班 。
In the xinchou Year (1241), Ögödei commanded Batu and the various princes to attack Yelieban who was ruler of the Orus [Rus'] tribe. They [the Mongol forces] tried besieging the city of Turiske but could not conquer it. Batu sent a request to the emperor that Sübe'etei take over command of the battle. [...] After a single battle, Yelieban was captured. Sübe'etei then attacked Turiske and conquered it after three days. They completely took over the whole territory of the Orus people and returned.	In this year (1234), Ögödei commanded Batu, who was one of the imperial princes, to advance to the west. Sübe'etei was in the vanguard, and they won a great victory. In Ögödei's thirteenth regnal year (1241), Sübe'etei attacked Yeliban who was ruler of the Orus [Rus'] tribe and captured him.	In the xinchou Year (1241), Ögödei commanded Batu and the various princes to attack the Orus [Rus'] tribe. They were defeated by the Orus. They sent a request to the emperor that they needed Subutai to direct the battles. Then, Yelieban who was the king of Orus tribe was captured.

This episode is peculiar to scholars because it is not immediately obvious to expert historians of both medieval Rus’ and the Mongol Empire who “Yelieban” is intended to represent. In the longest version of the biography found in the *Yuan Shi* *juan* 121, the name of the besieged city, “Turiske” [禿里思哥城] “city” is not able to be identified either and is a subject of additional speculation. Efforts to compare it with Rus’ chronicle sources like the *Novgorod First Chronicle*, *Galician-Volhynian Chronicle*, and *Laurentian Chronicle* do not result in any clear explanation. Comparison with these more detailed Rus’ Chronicles’ accounts of Batu’s invasion and the sack of named Rus’ cities and warfare with named Rus’ nobles does not solve the mystery. In the Rus’ chronicles for the years 1237–1238, we can see that Batu’s armies defeated Yuri II of Vladimir at the Sit River and made notable sieges of Ryazan, Vladimir, Suzdal, Moscow, Torzhok, and Kozelsk. The latter two saw longer resistance than most; in 1239–1240, the Mongol attacks in southern Rus’ culminated in the sack of Kiev [11, p. 81–84; 14, p. 45–48; 15, p. 59–63]. Yet none of the details found in Rus’ materials on the fall of Rus’ territories to Batu quite clearly matches with the toponym, Turiske, or the name of a chief leader, Yelieban, of the Rus’ in the surviving Chinese source material.

Early Mongol-Rus’ Contacts and East Asian Source Material on Rus’

The biography of Subutai was evidently originally composed in Mongolian in the decades of the mid-thirteenth century and was translated into Chinese already in the 1260s; the second biography of Subutai in the *Yuan Shi*, *juan* 122, can be dated to 1264 [3, p. 14–15]. The biography of Subutai only survives in the Chinese-language citations of various length included in fourteenth-century compiled works, with that found in *juan* 121 of the *Yuan Shi* being the most complete and detailed. The evidence of the Chinese versions of the text stemming from a Mongolian-language original are evident throughout the text. The rendering of the name of the Rus’ tribe (or tribes) is Wu-lu-si 兀魯思 (*Eluosi* in Yuan-era pronunciation) which undoubtably originates from Orus (*pl.* Orusut) which was the Mongolian name for the Rus’ people with whom they had direct experience in war and negotiations. The Mongols had a well-known tendency to prefix a vowel before a foreign proper noun, and this is especially true with a word beginning with an r- sound. That is why the Rus’ were called “Orusut” by the thirteenth-century Mongols, and this linguistic tendency will later be used in this paper to explain the origins of the name Yelieban – as a word taken into Mongolian from a Rus’ word that also began with an r- sound, namely Ryazan, and which was rendered in Chinese, via Mongolian original source material, as Ye-lie-zan.

Rus’-Mongolian interactions of course began with the campaign of Jebe and Subutai which unfolded against the Qipchaqs in 1222 after the two Mongol *tumen* commanders successfully broke out of the Caucasus Mountains and overran the Dasht-i-Qipchaq. The Rus’ decided to side with the recently defeated Qipchaqs who came to them seeking an alliance and the result was the catastrophic defeat of the Rus’ and their Qipchaq allies at the Battle of the River Kalka in May 1223. Interestingly, the biographies of Subutai describe this earliest campaign against the Rus’ in a way that is entirely recognizable to historians, including crucially the names of the supreme Rus’ leaders, Mstislav III of Kiev and Mstislav of Chernigov (or Mstislav the Bold of Galicia), in the 1223 events. The longest version of the

biography in *juan* 121 of the *Yuan Shi* describes it as follows: "Subutai subjugated the territory of the Qipchaq. Then he led the army to the Aligi [Aliji? Argi?] River. They encountered the old and the young Mstislav, rulers of the Rus' tribe. The enemy surrendered after one battle" [遂收其境。又至阿里吉河，與斡羅思部大、小密赤思老遇，一戰降之] [17, p. 56–58].

This is a concise but accurate description; the main leaders of the Russian confederated army were Mstislav the Great of Kiev, evidently the older or greater of the two, and Mstislav of Chernigov. Both died in the struggle. Mstislav the Bold of Galicia escaped and so probably was not mentioned as a third Mstislav of the defeated Russian people. As well, the surrender of Mstislav the Great and several other princes after holding out in a stockade is documented in Rus' chronicle accounts of the battle. The versions of the Subutai biography in the *Yuan Shi juan* 122 and in Su Tianjue's work record that it was a fierce and desperate battle (鏖戰) [17, p. 70; 20, p. 24], something reflected in other contemporary accounts such as that of Franciscan friar C. de Bridia and Mosul-based chronicler Ibn al-Athir, and implied in the *Secret History of the Mongols* [8, p. 201; 12, p. 72–75; 17, p. 70; 18, p. 223]. I have previously analyzed the broad agreement of Eastern and Western sources on the Kalka campaign, adding the viewpoint that Jebe Noyan himself was recorded in Rus' chronicles to have been slain by the Qipchaqs in its early stages [16, p. 14, 19]. Although the name of the river recorded in Chinese is not Kalka *per se*, "Argi" or something to that effect would be close enough if an initial K consonant were not missing. Furthermore, since Kalka was an obscure foreign word for an insignificant, distant toponym, it perhaps would have been easy for a copyist to have inaccurately copied it since it was not a particularly important or useful detail from a fourteenth-century Chinese scribe's perspective. Indeed, this relative carelessness with proper nouns and foreign toponyms which were totally unknown and irrelevant to Chinese compilers and copyists of the *Yuan Shi* and other sources, as well as the Mongolian tendency to prefix foreign names beginning with an r- with a vowel, appear to be crucial points in making sense of the puzzle of Ye-lie-ban, as will be demonstrated in the next sections of this paper.

The Second Mongol War with Rus' and the Account of the "Ruler," Yeliban

Since the account that recurs in the various surviving renditions of Subutai's biographies preserves the defeat of the Rus' people and names their leaders with a degree of recognizable accuracy in the case of the earlier 1223 campaign, it is surprising that the description of the later, much more large-scale and lasting conquest of the Rus' by Batu in 1237–1240 is so garbled, even in the most detailed Subutai biography, as to be basically unrecognizable. Nonetheless, several scholars have made attempts to identify who the Yeliban was that was defeated and captured during Batu's campaign. Emil Bretschneider, who described the details on this important campaign as "very meagre" regarding the conquest of northern Rus, and regarding southern Rus, the *Yuan Shi*'s details were even more useless: "As to the Chinese accounts of these events, they are also vague and unintelligible." Regarding the "Ye-li-ban king of the Russians" encountered in the *Yuan Shi* account, Bretschneider wrote in resignation, "I can give no explanation about the king Yeliban" [6, p. 315, 320, n. 761]. Yet he did note that the Turiske city that put up a strong fight against Batu so that Subutai was put in charge of the campaign in the

Chinese source might be tied to the famous resistance of the Russian city of Kozelsk (March-May 1238) documented by both Rashid al-Din and the *Galician-Volhynian Chronicle*. Rashid al-Din’s account mentions the siege of “Kosel-Iske” where Batu failed to take the city for two months and had to wait for the arrival of Buri and Qadan before the city finally fell [5, p. 60] – something which vaguely resembles the Subutai biography’s assertion that Batu needed Subutai to take over command before “Turiske” fell.

Other scholars have attempted, very reasonably, to connect the Ye-lie-ban figure with the campaign of 1237–1238 and the defeat of Yuri II of Vladimir at the River Sit on 4 March 1238. In fact, this was the opinion I expressed many years earlier in an article I co-authored on the Subutai biographies, imagining a scribal error had somehow distorted the name or title of Yuri II, or that an otherwise unknown figure with the common name of Ivan had perhaps played some important but now forgotten role in the heroic defense of Kozelsk [17, p. 63, n. 132]. Since then, I also considered the possibility that Yelieban was a composite of Yuri II who died at the Sit and his brother, Ivan Vsevolodovich of Starodub (d. 1247) who went to Mongolia in 1246 and died in 1247.

Admittedly these were reaching rather than satisfying assumptions, but very prominent scholars have offered suggestions along a similar vein. Paul D. Buell in his own translation of the biography of Subutai offered that Yelieban was “Yuri the pan,” demonstrating an awareness of the longstanding Slavic royal title of “pan/ban” as something which could make sense of the last syllable in the mysterious name [7, p. 99]. Carl Fredrik Sverdrup recently offered a very creative explanation, offering that the Volga Bulgar princes, Jiku and Bayan mentioned by Rashid al-Din, could have been conflated and mixed up with the Rus’ who were conquered in the same running campaign so that the Chinese account joined these names as Yelieban [21, n. 66]. Russian scholarship has also offered an explanation for the name relating to Russian royal figures of the period which will be discussed in the conclusion. Paul Pelliot likewise suggested that Yeliban was “Yuri-George” [13, p. 114–115]. In all the aforementioned suggestions of Western scholars, there is the recurring idea that we should be looking for a specific Rus’ historical ruler whose name has been corrupted in the Chinese rendering, but that this supposed individual’s personal name (with perhaps a Slavic noble title added as a suffix) is nonetheless vaguely identifiable in the material.

An Alternative Theory: Yelieban is Ryazan

Here I wish to offer a new solution to the old problem of Yelieban’s identity. Quite simply, Yelieban was originally meant to indicate “Ryazan,” though the statements regarding Yelieban as they exist in versions of Subutai’s biography reflect a curious amalgamation of various events that occurred over the course of the Great Western Campaign (1236–1242). I would argue that these events include primarily the sack of Ryazan (December 1237) but also the Battle of Tursko in Poland (February 1241) and perhaps some memory of the Mongol debacle during the fall of Kozelsk (May 1238).

The key solution is ultimately found by comparing the original Chinese text in the *Yuan Shi juan* 121, featuring Ye-lie-ban, with several other passages in the same larger dynastic history; of greatest importance is one found in *juan* 3 of the

Yuan Shi which contains the annals of the reign of the fourth great khan of the Mongol Empire, Möngke Khan (r. 1251–1259). The first part of *juan* 3 describes some key features of this Mongol ruler's background before he succeeded to the throne as great khan after some political tumult and intrigues following the death of Güyük Khan (r. 1246–1248). These earlier details of Möngke's pre-enthronement life include his exploits on the Western Campaign against the Qipchaq (欽察) and Russian (斡羅思) tribes. In the course of that campaign, the *Yuan Shi* annals mention that Möngke engaged personally in the combat at the city of "Ye-lie-zan" (也烈贊) which is accepted by scholars to be Ryazan. The *Yuan Shi* specifically states Möngke took part personally in the fighting at Ryazan and it was captured [至也烈贊城，躬自搏戰，破之] [25, p. 43–44]. This seems related perhaps to a general trend of behavior exhibited by Möngke, taking part in sieges and personally risking himself in battle. It is unambiguous and unquestionable because the suffix *cheng* (城), meaning a fortress city, is added to the three-syllable term for the city (也烈贊城). Regarding this passage, scholars would readily agree that it refers to Ryazan.

One will quickly realize that the rendering of the name of Ryazan (也烈贊城) in Yuan-era Chinese has a distinct similarity to the rendering of "Ye-lie-ban" (也烈班), the apparent ruler of the Rus' who appears separately in the *Yuan Shi* biographies of Subutai. Indeed, only the final graph is different between the two terms as they appear in our Chinese sources, and yet the corresponding final graphs are appreciably similar in structure that one could imagine a possible scribal error resulting in Ye-lie-ban when Ye-lie-zan was the original and intended term. We could easily allow for an error in transcription to have occurred, especially when we consider that such proper nouns originating in Northwestern Eurasia effectively meant nothing to those who were recording them, Chinese scholars deep in East Asia who would have been totally unaware of the real places represented by the transcriptions, thousands of kilometers from China and far outside of their own cultural milieu. Thus, my argument is that the original Mongolian biography of Subutai included the Mongolian rendering of "Ryazan" and this was mistakenly transcribed (and mistakenly made into a person) in Subutai's biography as Ye-lie-ban (也烈班) at some point. It could be that the prince of the city and the city itself were conflated in this process, although the reference to "Turiske" city [禿里思哥城] and the consistent date of 1241, by various dating systems, in the Chinese text hint that the battle for Ryazan had somehow become conflated in the records with the Mongol setback in Poland at the Battle of Tursko in February 1241, described by medieval Polish authors, Jan Długosz and C. de Bridia [15, p. 207–208].

The argument that the confusing reference to Yelieban stems at its core from Mongol memories of the struggle to capture Ryazan is solidified by multiple mentions of Ryazan in the *Yuan Shi*. We can be certain that Ryazan was yielded as *Ye-lie-zan*, directly or as a very close approximation, from two passages in the *Yuan Shi* which leave no room for ambiguity. Both passages specify that Yeliezan is a city (*cheng* 城) of the Rus' people. In a section of the *Yuan Shi* on geography pertaining to the Qipchaq (with whom the Rus' were broadly identified in Yuan texts),

the city is termed Ye-lie-zan-cheng (也列贊城). The text clarifies that Batu together with the various Mongol princes attacked the Rus' at Ryazan-city, and they took it in seven days [遂與諸王拔都征斡羅思，至也列贊城，七日破之] [25, p. 1570]. So, we see here the very same transcription of the name of the Rus' city as it appears in the *Yuan Shi* annals of the reign of Möngke Khan with the clarification that it was in fact the city of the Rus that was sacked after a siege of seven days; there is also an implication that this event was the first strike against the Rus' and that the Mongols remembered it as an important stage of the Western Campaign. Furthermore, in this case, the *Yuan Shi* has the correct date, noting this event occurred in 1237 (丁酉).

The seven-day battle for the city of Ryazan (*Ye-li-zan-cheng*, 也里贊城) – with a slightly different variation of Chinese characters, is mentioned in the biography of Shiri Gambu (昔里斡部). The relevant statement notes that in 1235, Güyük and Möngke, acting as senior princes, campaigned against the West with Subutai. The following year [1236], they mustered with Shiri Gambu in their midst. The next year [1237] they reached the Caspian Sea and Gambu took part in Batu's assault on the Rus' at the city of Ryazan. A huge battle was fought for seven days and they captured it [歲乙未，定宗、憲宗皆以親王與速卜帶征西域，明年啟行，斡部亦在中。又明年，至寬田吉思海，斡部從諸王拔都征斡羅斯，至也里贊城，大戰七日，拔之] [25, p. 3011]. The *zan* graph might be interpreted by editors, but in any case, the term *cheng* being added as a suffix to *ye-li-[zan]* confirms the name pertained to a city and shows that this was without doubt just another Chinese rendering of the Mongolian name for Ryazan – Irezan. This biography contains really important details on Western Campaign with additional details of the siege of Magas in 1239. It undoubtedly stemmed from a roughly contemporary Mongolian document of the events of the Great Western Campaign. The date of the fall of Ryazan was accurately recorded in this account as well.

The variations in the exact characters used to render "Irezan" (Ryazan) reflect that the Chinese materials that we have today typically represent translations from original Mongolian documents. The existence of an account of the Mongol campaign of the conquest of the West that exists in the Persian history of Rashid al-Din helps confirm this identification of Ryazan and supports my general argument. The dry report which Rashid al-Din provided of the Great Western Campaign today only exists in Persian, but it was also translated from Mongolian original material as is evident from the orthography of proper nouns as J.A. Boyle argued [5, p. 11]. This Persian material, noting Batu's same campaign of conquest against the Rus' recorded in the *Yuan Shi*, makes mention of the fall of the city of "Irezan." Again, this spelling reflects specific traits of Mongolian orthography of foreign words. This account notes that the campaign against the Rus' commenced in the autumn of 1237, that Möngke Khan took part, and that the first of the Rus' cities to fall was "Irezan" (ارزان) after a siege of three days.

The original text proceeds:

Original text of Rashid al-Din in Rowshan and Mūsavī's edition [19, p. 668]	Transcription into Roman alphabet	Original text of Rashid al-Din in Blochet's edition. [22, p. 46]	Transcription into the Roman alphabet	English translation (J.A. Boyle) [5, p. 59; 23, p. 322]
و پاییز سال مذکور تمامت شهرزادگان که آنجا بودند به جمعیت قورلیتای ساخمتند و باتفاق به جنگ اوروس برنشستند. باتو و اورده و گیوک خان، مونگه قان و کولگان و قدان و بوری باتفاق شهر ریزان را محاصره کردند و به سه روز بستندند...	Va pāyīz-e sāl- e madhkūr, tamāmat-e shahzādegān ke ānjā būdand be jam'tat qūriltāi sākhtand va be ettifāq be jang- e Ūrūs bar neshestand. Bātū va Ūrdah va Guyūk Khān va Mūngke Qā'ān va Kūlgān va Qadān va Būrī be ettifāq shahr-e Riyāzān rā mohāšere kardand va be seh rūz besetandand.	پاییز سال مذکور تمام شهرزادگان که آنجا بودند به جمعیت قورلیتای ساختند و باتفاق جنگ اروس بر نشستند باتو و اورده و کیوک خان و مونگکا قان و کولگان و قدان و بوری باتفاق شهر ریزان (ارزان) را محاصره کردند و به سه روز بستندند.	Payiz-e sal-e mazkoor tamam-e shahzadekan ke anja budand be jam'iyat qurlitai sakhtand va be ettefagh be jang-e orus [Rus] bar neshastand. Batu va Orda va Kuyuk Khan va Monkka qa'an va Kulkan va Qadan va Buri be ettefagh shahr-e Riazan (Ireza) ra mohasere kardand va be se ruz bastdand.	"In the autumn of the same year all the princes that were in those parts held a quriltai, and all together went to war against the Orus. Batu, Orda, Güyük Khan, Mongke Qa'an, Kolgen, Qadan, and Buri together laid siege to the town of Ireza, which they took in 3 days."

Just before this passage, the text notes that the chief Mongol princes attacked the Buqshi, Burtas, and "Irajan," the last of which W. Thackston took to merely be a variant of Irazan (ارزان), i.e. Ryazan [23, p. 322]. Interestingly, Rashid al-Din's account goes on to detail the remainder of the campaign against the Rus' in much more thorough detail than is found in the Subutai biography accounts. Like *juan* 3 of the *Yuan Shi*, Rashid al-Din's version of events records that Möngke demonstrated personal valor at the storming of one of the Rus' cities. But the Persian account claims this took place at "Great Yurgi" (i.e., Vladimir, the capital of Yuri II who was the leading prince in Russia at the time) rather than at Ryazan. It also shows partiality to Möngke by referring to him as Qa'an (khan of khans) but not bestowing the same honorific on Güyük who preceded him to that honor.

So, the question arises: what happened that accounts for this strange error in medieval East Asian literature that saw a Rus' city transformed into a ruler of the Rus' people? Since we have various Chinese transcriptions of Ryazan in the surviving materials, we have a valuable clue. There was no established convention, so the Chinese scribes simply made individual choices on foreign terms like Ryazan ("Ireza") that they encountered in Mongolian-language source documents. It seems likely to have stemmed from an error that occurred when proper nouns of foreign origin – totally unknown to scribes working in the Yuan state – were transcribed from Mongolian original documents into Chinese. It could be that certain

ambiguities in the texts, written in Mongolian in the Uyghur script, with which Persian and Chinese authors worked, caused confusion for scribes working in Chinese in this instance. That is, it could be that a character making a j-, or ch- sound in Mongolian was mistaken for a b- sound. Hence, Yeliezan could transform accidentally into Yelieban during the copying or transcription process. We might have a case of an unclearly written “Irejan” appearing to be “Ireban.” As an alternative speculation, an early error could have been made in the copying of the Chinese graphs that resulted in *zan* (贊) being rendered as *ban* (班).



We also must remember and underscore that the name of Ryazan would not have meant anything particular to scribes in East Asia – so if they had read that Ryazan was captured, they might just as soon have imagined that the term referred to a leader of the Rus’ rather than one of their cities. It simply would not have mattered since the Jochid ulus was utterly obscure to the vast majority of people in East Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when the source documents and the *Yuan Shi* were eventually composed, albeit from older source materials. Such errors are well known and quite common in the *Yuan Shi* – and one can imagine that the chances of transcription errors only increased when scholars in China were encountering proper nouns in their source materials for which they had no frame of reference.

Moreover, we have a famous precedent for a Western power’s ruler becoming conflated with the state in the eyes of the Mongols and their subjects. Authors such as the Mamluk scholars Baybars al-Mansuri (c. 1260–1325) and al-Nuwayri simply referred to the royal title of the king of Hungary as the state of Hungary itself (الكرل – al-KRL, i.e. Kerel, viz. Király) [2, p. 83–84, 106]. It was not particularly important to be precise about the frontier states confronting the Jochid ulus. Moreover, it is clearly demonstrable that a scholar in medieval Asia, using a Mongolian original document, could encounter proper nouns which meant essentially nothing to the editor/translator/transcriber of the historical documents that we now have. If the record stated that Mongol forces “attacked/captured XYZ,” the editor had to essentially guess if a nation, a ruler, a town etc., was meant. The fact that we can see by the Chinese transcription variations that a scribe consulted an original document for “Yelieban” and/or “Yeliezan” and transcribed the term in different ways in different instances suggests that someone, at some time, may have been trying to figure out what either variation of this Rus’ proper noun meant and could not shed light on the issue. In any case, their intended readership was not going to notice it.

The question might remain why Ryazan would be significant enough to show up as a name in the Chinese sources that contain forms of some original biography of Subutai. It was probably because it was the first battle against the Rus’ in Batu’s

Western Campaign, but also a hard-fought and significant one. The Rus' too remembered it in the early chronicles but also in the *Tale of the Destruction of Rязan* (*Povest' o razorenii Ryzani Batyem*), compiled in the 1530s–1560s. While it contains many inaccuracies and perhaps romantic details, the text likely reflects genuine events. For centuries, the Rus', too, remembered the brutal struggle and fall of the city in a vivid way, something corroborated by external primary source texts and archaeological evidence [10, p. 39–40, 70–72].

Conclusions

The account of Batu's conquest of the Rus', recorded in the various versions of the biography of Subutai, is indeed a confused amalgamation of episodes. It shows the difficulties faced by Chinese scholars dealing with Mongolian-language sources about far-off places and peoples, and full of toponyms, ethnonyms, and personal names which were unrecognizable to compilers and translators who nonetheless had to convert these terms into a Chinese approximation. When one also considers that the compilers had no awareness of the described events except through materials that were being transcribed from Mongolian, and that Chinese copies with errors could then be re-copied, the chance of the sort of error that resulted in "Yelieban, chief of the Rus' tribes" was high. It was not exceptionally important if the scribes copied authentic information about an obscure and distant country, its cities, or its political leaders.

Modern Russian scholarship was often close to solving this issue before I could publish it. In 2009, a Russian scholar, Roman Khrapachevsky, published Russian translations of several fragments from the *Yuan Shi* related to Russia and Eastern Europe. He did indeed identify Ye-lie-zan as it appeared in the text as Rязan on several occasions [1, p. 181, 208, 242]. He encountered the same textual passages that I did and noted this pattern. However, when he translated the biographies of Subutai, he did not establish the connection and deviated from the general picture he had observed. He noted: "В 13-м году [правления Угэдэя] (1241 г.) [Субэдэй] ходил карательным походом на владельца русских Юрия-бана и схватил его" [In the 13th year [of the reign of Ogedei] (1241) [Subetei] went on a punitive campaign against the ruler of the Russians Yuri-ban and grabbed him] [1, p. 242]. So, in this case, Khrapachevsky opted the tempting but false connection to Yuri II of Vladimir. This has been generally where the modern literature has pointed: a corrupted form of Yuri II with a Slavic royal title added as a suffix. That, indeed, was my own initial suspicion for several years.

Nonetheless, the argument that I presently advance (which at least might be new to an English-speaking readership that researches the Mongol Empire) might not be totally original but in fact is about two centuries old. In the 43rd volume of the *Biographie Universelle ancienne et moderne*, published in 1825, we note in the biography of Subutai, included in the larger encyclopedia, that an unnamed French author had already reached the same conclusions that I have regarding the mysterious Yelieban. Rather than taking Yelieban to be a person, the French author suggested this was a city, writing, "Sonboutai marcha contra le prince des Russes, lui livra bataille, le prit, s'empara de Yelieipan et d'autre villes des même contrées, et soumit toutes les tribus qui les habitaient" [4, p. 162]. That is: "Subutai marched against the prince of the Russians, gave him battle, captured him, and seized

Yelieban and the other towns of the same regions, and submitted all the tribes who inhabited them.” The author quietly and unassumingly distinguished the prince of the Rus’ from a city of Yelieban that he was defending against the Mongols. Whether the author identified that city as Ryazan is uncertain, but this rather remarkable passage shows that such notions have casually occurred to researchers even centuries before our time. It serves as a stark reminder of how innovative solutions to old historical problems have sometimes been floating around in the literature for centuries and have simply been ignored or overlooked.

Likewise, late Qing authors in the early twentieth century – while using Western sources like D’Ohsson to supplement the scarce details found in Chinese primary sources pertaining to Batu’s Great Western Campaign – seemed to have noticed the similarity between the Yelieban of the Subutai biographies and a city mentioned elsewhere in the *Yuan Shi*. The Chinese scholar, Tu Ji (1856–1921), in his biography of Batu (*liezhuan* 17), likewise seems to have identified “Lie-ye-zan,” interestingly reversing the graphs (烈也贊), as indeed a “famous city” or the “famous cities” (諸名城) that were conquered in that year. This statement clearly identifies Lie-ye-zan as a geographical location and attached to the city name itself. Moreover, Tu Ji’s seemingly intentional rearrangement better approximates the actual sound of Ryazan. He stated the Mongols invaded Rus’ for a year (一歲之間) and then divided and conquered Lie-ye-zan (烈也贊). Tu Ji seemed confused at times, taking Lie-ye-zan and Kolomna to be the Rus’ rulers (主) at another point [24, p. 369]. Another scholar from the late Qing and its aftermath, Ke Shaomin (1850–1933), also came close to explicitly solving the mystery over a century ago through his use of the combination of Eastern and Western sources. In his biography of Batu (*juan* 106 of the *Xin Yuan Shi*), he followed the lead of Tu Ji but did not make the mistake of calling Lie-ye-zan and Kolomna leaders of the Rus’, rather specifying that they were two cities that the Mongols attacked: [取勃蠻思克等城。南境諸王幼里與其弟羅曼分守烈也贊、克羅姆訥二城] [9, *juan* 106, p. 5].

In any case, the present investigation leaves us with little doubt that Yelieban ultimately stems from a transcription error and that the seed from which the story originates was the sack of Ryazan in late 1237. It is remarkable that a “historical figure” was, in a sense, created out of nothing in Yuan-era materials. However, that is not exactly the case. If there was a person who represented Ryazan, it would be, fittingly enough, Prince Yuri Ingwarevich who died with most of the other Ryazan royalty when the city fell to Batu’s onslaught on 21 December 1237. Thus, scholars who have suggested a “Yuri” was at the root of the Yelieban mystery might be consoled by that fact, and they were in a sense correct – a prince named Yuri was captured and slain at the fall of Ryazan as the Rus’ chronicles and the *Tale of the Destruction of Ryazan* attest. Beyond providing a satisfactory answer to a question regarding important source material on the Great Western Campaign, the present article might serve to highlight just how poorly the distant northwest quadrant of the Mongol Empire – the Jochid ulus – was known to the medieval inhabitants of the Yuan state. Indeed, as the shockingly brief and undetailed “biography” of Jochi that exists in the *Yuan Shi* noted of the Jochid state: “His lands are extremely far away, tens of thousands of li from the capital [modern Beijing]. Riders going at a fast pace travel for 200 days before they get to the capital. For that reason, none of that place’s cities or

customs are known in detail” [其地極遠，去京師數萬里，驛騎急行二百餘日，方達京師，以故其地郡邑風俗皆莫得而詳焉] [25, p. 2906].

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**«Е-ЛЕ-БАНЬ, ПРАВИТЕЛЬ РУССКОГО ПЛЕМЕНИ»:
ОБЪЯСНЕНИЕ СВИДЕТЕЛЬСТВА О РУССКОМ ПРАВИТЕЛЕ,
УПОМЯНУТОМ В «ЮАНЬ ШИ»**

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Резюме. Цель исследования. В данной статье предпринимается попытка объяснить идентичность «правителя племени русов Е-ле-баня», упомянутого в монгольско-китайских источниках XIII–XIV веков. В отличие от предыдущих попыток связать эту фигуру с Юрием II или каким-либо конкретным лицом, в статье выдвигается аргумент, что «Е-ле-бань» относится к городу Рязани.

Материалы исследования. Используются первоисточники, в первую очередь биографии Субэдэя в «Юань ши» (главы 121 и 122), другие разделы «Юань ши», «Юаньчао минчэнь шилуэ» Су Тяньцзюэ, Новгородская и Галицко-Волынская летописи, «Сокровенное сказание монголов» и Рашид ад-Дин. Также привлекалась вторичная литература ведущих специалистов по истории Монгольской империи, а кроме того китайские и французские работы XIX – начала XX века.

Результаты и новизна исследования. В статье утверждается, что «Е-ле-бань» является попыткой передачи названия Рязани на монгольский язык, записанного Рашид ад-Дином как «Ирезан». В процессе перевода и копирования, которые привели к созданию различных версий биографии Субэдэя, дошедших до нас, восточноазиатские авторы просто не знали, что такое «Ирезан», захваченный войсками Батыя, и ошибочно приняли «Е-ле-бань» за имя правителя, а не за город. Другие однозначные транскрипции Рязани в литературе эпохи Юань подтверждают эту идентификацию.

Ключевые слова: Монгольское нашествие на Русь, Юань ши, Е-ле-бань, русские летописи, Монгольская империя, монгольское вторжение в Европу, Батый, Субэдэй, Рязань

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