



On the Theory and the Practice of Comparative Source Studies*

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Abstract: This is an English translation of Sergey M. Kashtanov theoretical paper dedicated to the principles of comparative source studies. The main idea of the approach is that the corpus of extant sources (written texts and other material objects), produced each for a certain purpose, reflects the structure and the functioning of past societies. At the same time, they still materially exist and, thus, are a better object for a comparative study than any aspects of the life of the past societies which are still to be reconstructed. The paper is concerned, firstly, with the theoretical principles and possible directions of comparative source studies. Then, the author makes some observations on the development of certain kinds and sub-kinds of sources in different societies. It is pointed out that the chronological distance between the appearance of similar kinds of sources in different regions depends on the circle of social relations concerned in the documents of this kind. The author speaks, in more details, about the quantitative aspect of the issue of charters granting land and immunity in the Frankish State/France and in Rus/Russian State.

Key words: comparative studies, source studies, diplomatic, Middle Ages, Rus, Russian State, Frankish State

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К теории и практике сравнительного источниковедения

Аннотация: Впервые публикуется английский перевод теоретической статьи С. М. Каштанова, посвященной принципам компаративного источниковедения. Главная идея этого подхода состоит в том, что корпус сохранившихся источников (как письменных, так и иных), произведенных каждый с какой-то целью, отражает струк-

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туру и функционирование общества прошлого. В то же время источники сохранились и существуют материально, что делает их более надежным объектом для сопоставления, нежели любые аспекты жизни обществ прошлого, которые сами являются предметом реконструкции. Статья, во-первых, посвящена теоретическим принципам компаративных источниковедческих исследований и их возможным направлениям. Во-вторых, автор делает ряд наблюдений, касающихся динамики развития ряда видов и разновидностей источников в различных обществах. Отмечается, что различия в этой динамике могут быть обусловлены тем, к какой сфере общественной жизни они относятся. Более детально в статье рассматривается количественный аспект развития земельного акта во Франкском государстве/Франции и на Руси/в Русском государстве.

Ключевые слова: компаративистика, источниковедение, дипломатика, Средние века, Русь, Русское государство, Франкское государство

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Historians always tend to compare phenomena, events, and processes that took place in different epochs and regions. Sometimes such comparison seems reasonable, and sometimes it looks arbitrary or paradoxical. It often is based on no more than an ‘impression’ of a historian about a similarity between two periods in the history of one country, or of two different countries. For example, the decline of the Roman Empire repeatedly was compared with the declines of other great empires.

All global theories of historical development are based on an absolutization of one or several characteristics which can unite different regions and periods into one general system. Such systems can be labeled as ‘formations’, ‘civilizations’, ‘cycles’, etc. Not denying that such labels can reflect not only ideal ‘types’, but also the multi-variant reality, the author believes that the comparison of epochs and regions would be more adequate if to consider and to analyze the corpus of sources¹ produced by the compared societies.

¹ I tend to translate the Russian *источник* (*istochnik*) as ‘source’ even if it does not seem not natural for English usage. In Kashtanov’s usage, this word is very terminological (see below). I also use the wording ‘source studies’ as the translation of Russian *источниковедение* (*istochnikovedenie*, compare German *Quellenkunde*). In the Russian academic tradition *source studies* are a sub-discipline of history, and it is specially taught in faculties of history (*Translator’s note*).

Due to the unevenness of the development of different regions, societies can be typologically similar but chronologically distant. In other words, different regions can pass the same stages of development in different times and in different historical circumstances. Nevertheless, if those stages are really typologically similar, this similarity, in spite of any chronological and geographical distance, will definitely manifest itself in the similarity of the corpora of sources produced by those societies. Even if similar, those corpora will never be absolutely identical. Some structures in those societies certainly will be different, or differently interconnected, and those differences will manifest themselves in the relative weight of different sub-kinds in the same kinds of sources², in the interrelations of the kinds of sources, in the specific features of their form and content.

We have already spoken of the comparison based upon an ‘impression’. The very ‘impression’, however, is predefined by the sum of knowledge accumulated by the scholars. So, the comparison based upon ‘impression’ is a deductive method: a historian goes from a general picture of the compared societies to a comparison of some of their particular characteristics. A preliminary general knowledge is the starting point for the comparative source studies as well. However, the logic of study here is different. Contrary to comparative studies concerned with social structures, institutions, law, ideas, culture, or the like, comparative source studies are lucky to deal with the object of research which materially exists: the surviving sources with their outer and inner form, outer and inner content³. So, the first task is to compare the corpora of sources produced by each of the compared societies.

The comparison of the corpora of sources must serve as a somewhat guarantee against arbitrariness of conclusions. A comparison of sources belonging to only one kind is useful, but not sufficient. It is fraught with peril of not taking into account the specific features of each of the compared societies. A comparison of particular institutions or ideas can be even more arbitrary.

The ‘corpus of sources’ must mean the whole totality of them. Ideally, the comparison must concern all the types and kinds of historical sources. So, the comparative source studies in broad sense would include: 1) the nature (climat, flora, fauna); 2) human being; 3) oral tradition; 4) material prod-

² Again, the terms ‘kinds’ and ‘sub-kinds’ of sources (*виды, разновидности источников*) are used by Kashtanov very terminologically. According to Kashtanov, the classification of sources must be based upon the ways (and variations of the ways) the authors of the sources tend to influence reality and to reach their goals, see Каштанов 1969. С. 153–165; 1988. С. 146–154; and below (*Translator’s note*).

³ According to Kashtanov, the *outer form* of a written source is its material appearance (e. g. material for writing, script, layout, etc.), the *inner form* is its structure and style, the *outer content* is its explicit meaning, and the *inner content* is the historical processes reflected in the source (see Каштанов 1988. С. 154, 169, 196) (*Translator’s note*).

ucts of human activity. In practice, there is no such discipline as source studies in such a broad sense, and even one type of sources is treated by specialists in several disciplines. Source studies in narrow sense are dedicated to written sources that comprise a part of the fourth category: material products of human activity. At the early stages of human history, humans produced objects only. The appearance of objects with written texts was an important shift in the development of material and spiritual culture.

Objects, or material sources, can be classified into three groups according to their function: 1) objects with no written text (so, designed only to play their own role in the sphere of economy, everyday life, religion, or culture); 2) objects designed specially to bear a written text; 3) objects combining the features of the previous two groups (tools, buildings, temples, paintings, icons, coins, coats of arms, and other inscribed objects). Source studies in narrow sense deal with the second and, partly, the third groups. Dealing with them, scholars should be aware that the comparison of societies should be concerned with other groups of sources as well, with all the total of them. Nevertheless, written sources are themselves a representative total (even if a not self-sufficient one) as they reflect a certain level of a social development.

When we speak of the early stages of social development, written evidence typically comes not from those societies themselves, but from neighbouring peoples which had already reached a higher level of social and cultural development (if, of course, such neighbouring societies already existed). For example, Greek and Roman classical authors provide us with information on the peoples which did not yet have their own writing. Some of those peoples perished from the historical arena, others later obtained their own writing and produced sources of different kinds and sub-kinds.

A kind of written sources is a total of individual documents united by a common social function. The analysis of the sources surviving from Old Rus shows that the function of religious didactics was the most productive in that period. Liturgical literature (and, first of all, Gospel-books) absolutely prevails in the corpus of surviving 11th- and 12th-century Rus manuscripts. Laws and acts were not so numerous. Initially, those functions emerged in the sphere of international relations, and probably not without an influence of the written culture of the counterparty (see the 10th-century treaties between Rus and Byzantium). In any case, charters concerned with domestic administration and landownership appeared as late as in the 12th century, and they became more or less widely spread in the 14th century. The first example of a written law, the earliest version of *Russkaya Pravda* (Yaroslav the Wise's *Pravda*) appeared earlier than the oldest domestic charters. Annals and epistolary texts emerged in Rus not later than in the 11th century. In the

same century, inscriptions on various objects, on church walls, and in parchment books started to be made.

It is not easy to find adequate parallels to the makeup of the corpus of Rus 11th- to 13th-century sources. *Russkaya Pravda* of the 11th-12th centuries can be paralleled to the ‘barbarian’ laws of Western Europe of the 5th-9th centuries. The Rus annals (*letopisi*)⁴ are somewhat similar to the Western annals of the 6th-10th centuries. At the same time, the Western European acta of the 6th-8th centuries are more comparable (if one speaks of the quantity as well as of the structure of sub-kinds) to the Rus acta of the 14th-15th centuries than to the sporadic documents surviving from the 12th century. Documents typical for the 6th- to 8th-century Frankish State (diplomas granting land and immunity privileges, court decisions resolving land lawsuits, private land acta) show close analogies to the Rus written practice of the 14th-15th centuries. Capitularies appearing in Charlemagne’s time are similar to *ustavnye gramoty* and *ustavnye knigi* (charters and books of rules) of the 16th-century *prikazy* (governmental agencies). The decline of Rus *letopisi* (annals) in the second part of the 16th and the 17th century is a phenomenon similar to the decline of the genre of annals in Western Europe after the 12th century – however, contrary to the West, in Rus, annals were not replaced with chronicles, because of, probably, a weaker urban culture on the one hand, and the appearance of new mass media on the other.

It would be worth thinking which sources elsewhere are comparable to such Russian documents of the 16th-17th centuries as *pistsovye knigi* (books of land cadaster), *razryadnye knigi* (books of appointments), *posolskie knigi* (books of diplomatic contacts), etc. Were *pistsovye knigi* and *perepisnye knigi* of the 15th- to 17th-century Russian State perceived in the same way as the Domesday Book in 11th-century England? Or, maybe, the perception of the latter was more similar to that of the Mongolian census in 13th-century Rus, known as *chislo*, of which we possess little detailed information? Can one compare *pistsovye knigi* and *sotnitsy* to medieval French *cadastres* and *terriers*? Scholars have tried to compare Russian *pistsovye knigi* with Byzantine inventories. Byzantine parallels have been postulated for other kinds of Rus sources: liturgical books, annals, letters, laws, *ustavy* (rules), etc. Those studies, however, are dominated by text-historical approach, and not by an attempt to find out a typological proximity of societies belonging to different periods.

⁴ The Russian word *lemonucu* (*letopisi*, ‘year-writings’) is translated into English as both ‘annals’ and ‘chronicles’. The difference between the latter two is itself a problematic question; however, if to see any difference, ‘annals’ would be a slightly better translation (see Guimon 2021. P. 30–33, with references) (*Translator’s note*).

One could suppose that the chronological distance between the appearance of similar kinds of sources in different regions depends on the circle of social relations reflected in the documents of this kind. It seems that such distance is the largest for the sources concerned with the very basis of socio-economic relations in each of the compared societies. Probably, it is not incidental that land acta appeared in the Frankish State in the 6th–7th centuries, in Rus in the 12th–14th centuries, and in Bukhara in the 19th century. The distance is smaller for the sources concerned with the spheres of politics (especially domestic politics) as well as of social thought and literature. In this latter sphere, the distance becomes smaller and smaller as far as international cultural links develop, and the society accumulates intellectual potential (those processes going faster than the development of socio-economic relations). For example, annalistic, liturgical, and hagiographic sources appeared in Rus earlier than land acta. The development in the sphere of literature goes even faster at later stages of cultural development. Such kind of sources as newspapers, having appeared in the West in the 16th century, found its way into Russia in the 18th century. At the same time, promissory notes, having appeared in Italy as early as in the 13th century, took roots in Russia with difficulties even in the 18th century, and during a long time only the simplest type of promissory notes existed (not bills of exchange), replacing the more traditional *zaemnoe pis'mo* (letter of loan). This was a result of a braking influence of the socio-economic relations in the times of serfdom. Somewhat similar socio-economic relations in the times of socialism led to the stop of the usage of promissory notes in domestic trade in the USSR from 1930 (they continued to be used in foreign trade, however).

We have been speaking mostly of, let us say, 'horizontal' comparative studies, that is, of the comparison of two or more corpora of written sources produced by more or less similar societies (but separated geographically and chronologically). It is possible to develop 'vertical' comparative source studies as well. The history of one kind or one sub-kind of sources can be studied in a historical perspective: from the most ancient to the most recent times. Sources from one or several regions can be selected for such a study. If the study covers several regions, the chronology should be limited (e. g., laws in the Ancient World; plans and maps in Western Europe and Russia in the 16th–18th centuries).

A direction of comparative source studies that should not be neglected is the analysis of the outer form of the sources, including the material for writing. In this field, studies of sources of the same kind or sub-kind but written on different materials (stone, metal, wood, birchbark, papyrus, parchment, paper, etc.) may be fruitful. One more direction of comparative studies is the comparison of different forms of material appearance of

sources (single sheets, diptychs, polyptychs, horizontal and vertical rolls, quires, codices, etc.).

The comparative method requires taking into account, on the one hand, the general classification of the kinds of sources, and, on the other hand, the structure of sub-kinds inside each kind of sources. In our historiography, the term *kind of sources* is very popular. However, some scholars understand a *kind* as a big group of sources united by a common socio-juridical function, and the others so identify any group of sources with the same name. The term *kind* often is used when it would be more appropriate to speak of a *sub-kind*, or even of *sub-sub-kind*. It is not always taken into account that *kind* is an international category, and that sources can belong to one kind but originate from different countries and from different epochs, from the ancient to the recent times. Of the *sub-kinds*, some also are international (e. g. charters of donation, purchase, pledge, wills, etc.), but others can be found only in a certain country and epoch (e. g. *zhalovannye, postupnye, kortomnye gramoty*)⁶. *Sub-sub-kinds* and *super-sub-sub-kinds*⁷ are even closer to particular documents (e. g. *tarkhannye, tarkhanno-nesudimye, dvusrochnye gramoty*, etc.)⁸.

Professional historians are hostile to the illustrative usage of sources. Historians need to be sure that all the documents of a certain sub-kind are known to them, and that they study not some ‘interesting’ passages of the texts but all the corpus. It is necessary, first of all, to define how many sources of a certain sub-kind are known, and how they are distributed by addresser, addressee, or sphere of usage. It also is necessary to consider how many documents are extant in originals, in copies, in excerpts, or are known from mentions only. In diplomatic, especially in the studies of early medieval acts, such counting is an ordinary practice.

In Georg Pertz’s edition 97 Merovingian royal diplomas, from Clovis I (dated to 507) to Childeric III (744), are treated as authentic, and 95 diplomas, from Clovis I (479) to Childeric III (749), are defined as *diplomata spuria* (MGH DI. T. 1). Georges Tessier pointed out that 6 of those 192 documents are not royal acts⁹. To the remaining 186 documents, one can add 13 more diplomas

⁵ The first of those terms can be roughly translated as *diploma*. The second is a charter by which a person renders his/her property to receive money, but this is not a pledge since the property is not expected to be returned. The third is a sort of lease charter (*Translator’s note*).

⁶ For a brief overview of land acts of different epochs and regions, see Каштанов 1961.

⁷ On this terminology, see Каштанов 1988. С. 17, 149–154; 1998. С. 16–17.

⁸ Sorts of diplomas granting certain immunity privileges (*Translator’s note*).

⁹ Tessier probably spoke of the charters of two abbesses, alleged daughters of King Dagobert II, Irmina, 698–704 (MGH DI. P. 173–177, № 55–59), and Adela, 685 (Ibid. P. 177–178, № 60), placed by Pertz in the rubric *Diplomata spuria*.

that were not edited by Pertz (Tessier 1962. P. 6, n. 2; Classen 1977. S. 133). Of the resulting 199 documents, only 38 survive in originals (of which the earliest is the precept of Chlothar II of 625, and the latest is the precept of Childeric II of the 28th of February, 717. – Tessier 1962. P. 6–7). 161 charters survive as copies in cartularies and chronicles of monasteries or churches (Classen 1977. P. 133–135). More than a half of them are fabricated or at least interpolated. The authenticity of some of the Merovingian diplomas extant in copies is a subject to dispute.

Robert-Henri Bautier counted 2800 authentic diplomas of the Carolingian period (from the mid-8th to the 10th century) extant in originals, copies, or more or less substantial excerpts. One can add to this about 500 mentions of non-extant documents, and some 350 spurious charters. Of the authentic documents, about 1000, or one third, are parchment originals. Bautier, taking into account only authentic documents extant in full, shows their chronological distribution. Some 700 charters survive from the period of the undivided monarchy (751–840). As for the period after the division of the Frankish State, some 860 charters are from Germany and Lotharingia (to 911), 720 charters are from France and Aquitaine (to 987), and 500 charters are from Italy, Provence, and Burgundy. Bautier presents even more detailed statistics as to demonstrate the distribution of extant charters by reign and region. He concludes that, after Charles the Bald's death, France ultimately stops to be a leader in the production of Carolingian diplomas. In Charles the Bald's reign, the average number of diplomas per year was 13,5. Between 922 and 987 it was only 3, and it became even less after the succession of Hugh Capet (Bautier 1990. T. 2. P. 462–464).

With the strengthening of the royal power in France and the revival of the royal chancery, the quantity of *acta* started to constantly grow. Louis VI (1108–1137) issued more than 500 diplomas, Louis VII (1137–1180) issued 798 diplomas, Philip II Augustus (1180–1223) issued 1287 diplomas (see more details in Каштанов 1974. С. 307). According to Bautier, in the 14th–15th centuries, the French royal chancery issued up to 150 documents per day (see Каштанов 1982. С. 37; 1988. С. 169). Bautier counts that in the first half of the 14th century, about 60 000 documents with the royal seal per year could be issued in France (Bautier 1984. S. 51; Каштанов 1988. С. 169).

In Rus, princely charters similar to Merovingian precepts, i. e. granting land and immunity privileges, appeared in the 12th century (four documents of which one is extant in original). No authentic documents of this sub-kind survive from the 13th century. One charter, not extant but mentioned, may have been issued by Great Prince of Ryazan Mikhail Yaroslavich *c.* 1300 (АСЭИ. Т. 3. С. 339–340, № 309). 17 charters granting land and immunity are known from the 14th century (of which one is spurious, and only

three survive in originals). 10 charters with no precise date could be dated to a time around 1400 or the first third of the 15th century. It seems that most of them belong already to the 15th century.

About 30 charters granting land and immunity were issued between 1400 and 1425, in the reign of Vasily I of Moscow (of them, six documents survive in originals). In the reign of Vasily II (1425–1462), the issue of charters became more regular. We know of 270 charters issued within this interval, both by the great prince of Moscow and by other rulers (mostly by local princes belonging to the Moscow branch of the dynasty). The average number of charters issued per year is 7,3 (of which the majority were issued by the chancery of the great prince of Moscow). In the time of Ivan III (1462–1505), about 400 charters were issued, that is, 9,3 charters per year, and again the majority of them came from the chancery of the great prince¹⁰.

Within the shorter reign of Vasily III (1505–1533) also about 400 charters granting land and immunity were produced (mostly by the chancery of the great prince, but also by local princes and other rulers). The average number of charters per year was approximately 14,3.

During the reign of Ivan IV (1533–1584), no less than 1260 immunity charters proper were issued¹¹, if not to count *poslushnye* and *voznyye gramoty* (charters prescribing peasants to obey a new landowner) which constituted a new sub-kind of land charters. Taking into account only immunity charters, we can speak of a yearly ‘norm’ of 25,2 charters per year. However, the issue of charters was uneven; there were some outbursts of their production. In 1534, 1547, and 1548, the number of documents issued was 45, 51, and 30, respectively (Каштанов 1988. С. 168). There were, at the same time, periods of limited production of charters. The ratio of charters by local rulers became much smaller in comparison with the time of Vasily III.

So, already in the reign of Vasily II, the number of royal charters issued per year became much bigger than in the Merovingian State. During the 160 years from the succession of Vasily II till the death of Ivan IV, approximately 2330 charters were issued – a quantity comparable with the Carolingian charter-production: 3300 documents (2800 extant and 500 mentioned) for 236 years. In the reigns of Vasily II and Ivan III, the average number of charters per year (7,3 and 9,3, respectively) was smaller than in the reign of Charles the Bald (13,5), but in the reign of Ivan IV (25,2), it became bigger than even in the times of such 12th-century Capetians as Louis VI (16,5) and Lou-

¹⁰ All figures are based on our card index of *zhalovannye* and *ukaznye gramoty* (diplomas and writs) of the 12th–16th centuries, that is based, in turn, first of all, on such fundamental editions as АСЭИ, АФЗХ, ГВНП, etc.

¹¹ Figures for the reigns of Vasily III and Ivan IV are based on Каштанов 1958; 1962; Каштанов, Назаров, Флоря 1968.

is VII (18,5) (Каштанов 1974. С. 307). It did not reach yet the level of Philip II Augustus (29,2) but was getting nearer to it.

Such quantitative comparison of documents of the same sub-kinds is, of course, only a preliminary stage of the comparative study that needs to be extended in many other directions (see, e. g., Каштанов 1999)¹².

Translated by Timofey V. Guimon

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¹² In that paper, Kashtanov compares early Rus immunity charters with Frankish diplomas; this comparison prompts in some cases a better interpretation of the Rus documents (*Translator's note*).

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