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# Black banner and white nights: The world of Ibn Fadlan

Joseph Daniel Wilson  
*James Madison University*

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Black Banner and White Nights: The World of Ibn Fadlan

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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by Joseph Daniel Wilson

May 2014

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of History, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

HONORS PROGRAM APPROVAL:

---

Project Advisor: Timothy J. Fitzgerald, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor of History

---

Barry Falk, Ph.D.,  
Director, Honors Program

---

Reader: Stephen Chappell, Ph.D.,  
Associate Professor of History

---

Reader: John J. Butt, Ph.D.,  
Professor of History

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my parents and siblings. Without their support and sacrifice, I could not complete my education.

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## **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank Dr. T.J. Fitzgerald for his guidance and patience during the production of this thesis. His expertise was vital in turning my infatuation with the account of Ibn Fadlan into an educated understanding of the man and his time.

I also wish to thank Dr. Chappell and Dr. Butt for their time and feedback as readers. Their fresh insight was invaluable in making revisions.

## Introduction

The 10<sup>th</sup>-century travel account of the Abbasid envoy Ibn Fadlan (fl. 921 CE)<sup>1</sup> is an underappreciated primary source of Postclassical world history, one that tears the veil from an

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent translation of Ibn Fadlān is the Penguin publication with commentary: Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (New York: Penguin, 2012). Scholar of medieval Islam Richard Frye published his own translation and commentary: Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard N. Frye (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2005). The translation from which Stewart Gordon worked was: James E. McKeithen, "The Risalah of Ibn Fadlan: An Annotated Translation and Introduction" (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1979). French Orientalist Marius Canard wrote the entry on Ibn Fadlān in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. He also wrote a French translation of the account that was re-printed in multiple decades: Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, *La relations du voyage d' Ibn Fadlān chez les Bulgares de la Volga*, trans. Marius Canard (Algiers, 1958). Soviet historian A.P. Kovalevskiy translated a Russian version: Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, *Kniga Akmeda Ibn Fadlan o ego puteshestvii na Volgu v 921-922gg.*, trans. A.P. Kovalevskiy (Kharkov, 1956). This was produced from work performed prior to his death in the Stalinist purges. D.M. Dunlop translated into English the very last section of the account for his work D.M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954). Hungarian Karoly Czegledy published a German translation: Karoly Czegledy, "Zur Meschheder Handschrift von Ibn Fadlāns Reisebericht," *Acta Orientalia* 5 (1950): 218-260. The Soviet Bashkir historian, Turkologist, and revolutionary nationalist Zeki Velidi Togan published a German version as well: Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlan's Reiserbericht*, trans. Zeki Velidi Togan (Leipzig, 1939). Togan was the first historian to work from the complete manuscript found in Meshhed, Persia in 1923. His work on the account comprised his doctoral dissertation at Bonn University. That same year an earlier Russian translation by A.P. Kovalevskiy was published for which he did not receive credit: Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, *Puteshetvie Ibn Fadlana na Volgu , perevod i kommentariy*, trans. I. Yu. Krackovskiy, (Moscow-Leningrad, 1939). American scholar and philologist Albert Stanburrough Cook translated into English the partial account concerning the Rus: Albert Stanburrough Cook, " Ibn Fadlān's Account of Scandinavian Merchants on the Volga in 922," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 22, No. 1 (January 1923): 54-63. That portion was from the '*Kitab mu'jam al-Buldan (Dictionary of Countries)* by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic chronicler Yaqut al-Hamawi al-Rumi al-Baghdadi and was earlier translated into German by the Orientalist Heinrich Ferdinand Wüstenfeld: Yaqut al-Hamawi al-Rumi al-Baghdadi, *Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch*, trans. Heinrich Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Leipzig: In Commission bei F. A. Brockhaus, 1866-73). Christian Martin von Frähn translated portions of the account into German much earlier. Born in 1782 in Mecklenburg-Holstein, he became a master of Near Eastern languages which led to high positions in Russian institutions. His German translation was entitled Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen älterer Zeit*, trans. Christian Martin von Frähn (St. Petersburg, 1832). The very first European for which there is evidence for scholarship and translation of Ibn Fadlān's account is J.L. Rasmussen. His Danish translation was subsequently translated to Swedish and English for publication in journals: J.L. Rasmussen, "Om Arabernes og Persanes bekjendtskab og Handel I Middelalderen med Rusland og Skaninavien," *Athene*, Bd. 2 (1814): 305-318.

Many scholars have written significantly about Ibn Fadlān without writing a full translation of his work, some very recently. University of Michigan researcher Stewart Gordon included a commentary of the travel account in his recent collection of Asian travelogues: Stewart Gordon, *When Asia Was The World*, (Philadelphia: DeCapo Press, 2008). Cambridge University professor of Arabic and Persian Studies James Montgomery addressed the account in two articles: James E. Montgomery, "Travelling Autopsies: Ibn Fadlān and the Bulghar," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7, No. 1 (2004): 3-32 and James E. Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3, (2000): 1-25. Thomas Noonan was a professor at the University of Minnesota that specialized in the history of the Khazars and the origins of the Kievan state. His works that cited Ibn Fadlān include: Thomas S. Noonan, "Fluctuations in Islamic Trade with Eastern Europe during the Viking Age," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 16, No. ¾ (December 1992): 237-259 and Thomas S. Noonan, "Why the Vikings First Came to Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, Bd. 34, H. 3 (1986): 321-348. Much of the early scholarship concerning the account dealt with ship burial described in the Yaqut fragment. German Orientalist Josef Marquart published a criticism of the Ibn Fadlān account that has since been refuted: J. Marquart, "Ein arabischer Bericht über die

age long considered dark. His chronicle offers historians a last look at what the Near East and Central Asia were like prior to the Turkic migrations as well as the incursions of the Crusaders. His history is a human history. In describing his travels, he wrote about people. His writing reveals the inner workings of the northern trade system in a way that is easy to visualize. Instead of using broad concepts and lists of goods to learn about Postclassical trade, Ibn Fadlan's account illustrates real people and places. One can easily see the faces of the Rus, the Bashkirs, and the Bulgars as he writes of his conversations. The account introduces individual Turks and explains in detail how guest-friendship was established between Islamic merchants and transhumant horse-lords. Ibn Fadlan named the rivers he forded and described how camel skin boats were used to make dangerous crossings. He spoke of the bazaars in Bukhara and Khwarazm, the function of coins, as well as the market along the Volga where northern goods entered the Islamic trade system.

Ibn Fadlan left a wealth of vivid descriptions of the daily life of a broad spectrum of early Postclassical peoples. He observed settled Islamic peoples living in Central Asia, nomadic Turkic tribesmen of the Western Steppe, and Scandinavian traders that traversed the riverine

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arktischen (Uraischen) Länder aus dem 10 Jahrhundert," *Ungarische Jahrbücher*, Bd. 4 Heft ¾ (1924): 261-334. His contemporary Komosko was the first to posit that Ibn Fadlān had lifted his material concerning the Khazars from the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Persian geographer Estakhri: M. Komosko, "Die Quellen Istachri's in seinem Berichte über die Chasaren," *Körösi Csoma Archivum*, 1 kötet 2 szam (1921): 141-148. Russian V.R. Rosen published an article detailing the research done up to his time on the subject and called for more innovative thought on the matter in V.R. Rosen, "Prolegomena k novom izdaniiu Ibn Fadlana," *Zapiski Vostochnogo Otdeleniia Imperatorskogo Arkheologicheskogo Obshchestva*, t. xv. (1904). This was in response to a skeptical critique of the account by fellow countrymen A.A. Spitsyn who believe Ibn Fadlān was an unreliable chronicler: A. Spitsyn, "O stepeni dostovernosti zapiski Ibn Fadlana," *Zapiski Russkogo Arkheologicheskogo Obshchestva*, t. 9, no. 2 (1899) 161-166. Norwegian Alexander Seippel was an early adherent to Normanist theory. He published a series of works illustrating Arab texts that mentioned peoples of Scandinavian origin: A. Seippel, "Rerum normannicarum fonts arabici," Oslo, 1896-1928. The earliest commentaries arrived shortly after the Wüstenfeld translation (see below) was widely available. Yet these commentaries were fragmentary and took on a nationalistic tone. The section concerning the Scandinavians and the Bulgars was included in a work of Russian history from Arab sources: A.E. Harkavy, *Skazaniia musul'manskikh pisatelei o slavianahk i Russikh* (St. Petersburg, 1870). The famous ship funeral passage was published in a Danish journal with commentary: C.A. Holmboe, "Ibn Foszlān om nordiske Begravelseskikke , fra det Arabiske oversat og med Anmaerkninger oplyst," *Fordhandlinger et i Christiana Videnskabselskab* (1869): 270-280.

routes of northern Russia. Most of these peoples did not leave a written record of their own. As such, Ibn Fadlan's account is a rare record of the habits and movements of peoples that were vital in connecting civilizational zones over long, inhospitable distances. He wrote what many modern scholars consider ethnography. Indeed, he noted what he thought strange and foreign customs. This was due to his urbane understanding of Islamic rites. While these personal behavioral observations are fascinating, his account reveals much more. Taken as a whole, a journal of the political, economic, social and religious practices of a disparate group of peoples emerges. His account illustrates the specifics of the spread of major religions and of long-range connectivity, spanning from Scandinavia to Mesopotamia, defining features of Postclassical world history. Moreover, it does so in an era on the verge of great changes.

Ibn Fadlan was a non-Arab client of a high-ranking military official in the Abbasid court. He was a minor character in his own story and his own time; a diplomat sent to the frozen north by a dying polity, ostensibly to gain a weak ally. There are no poems written celebrating his deeds, not by contemporaries or later admirers. Indeed, he is a man, "of whose life nothing is known."<sup>2</sup> There is no mention of Ibn Fadlan or his journey in the chronicles of contemporary historians or public records.<sup>3</sup> He is rarely acknowledged by scholars and is little read by students to this day, but his account is valuable and important.

Ibn Fadlan was likely of Persian descent, as was the Abbasid dynasty. He was a scribe, a diplomat and learned in Islamic law. He probably composed his account in Arabic, but he could have easily written in Persian as his was a polyglot milieu of prose and poetry. He was a man of letters. He arranged his account chronologically, but it does not read like a diary, with daily

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<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Ibn Fadlan"

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



notations and personal thoughts and fears.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the account reads as a measured recollection based on a studied, well-documented journal. While he placed events in order, he also took time to elaborate on foreign customs and concepts in a thematic way, interrupting the narrative and unconcerned with precise dating. Therefore, it appears Ibn Fadlan wrote the account after he arrived back in Baghdad, after the failure of the embassy.

The embassy from the Abbasid Caliphate left Baghdad on June 21, 921 CE. Their mission was to instruct the Volga Bulgars<sup>5</sup> in the ways of Islam and to build them a mosque, as well as to deliver funds for the construction of a fortification. The Bulgars had requested these things so they would grow closer to the Abbasids and gain an ally that bordered their hated Turkic overlords: the Khazars. Ibn Fadlan and his fellow travelers journeyed along the Khurasan Road, a well-established trade route that traversed the Zagros Mountains of western Persia, the Alborz Mountains of northern Persia, as well as the high desert plateau of eastern Persia. They traveled with caravans for mutual protection, sometimes mixing in and posing as merchants when they desired to conceal their identities. The company spent nights in caravanserais; commercial way stations that catered to the traffic along the Silk Road. They then turned north and entered Khurasan. Their destination was the capital of the Samanid Emirate: Bukhara.<sup>6</sup> The embassy lingered in the flourishing cosmopolitan city of trade, art, and science for a month. They awaited the arrival of a straggler. His absence dragged on and the travel schedule was threatened by the changing of seasons. Once satisfied that their companion would not arrive, the company

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<sup>4</sup> All apologies to Richard Frye, who believes that the account "reads like a diary."

<sup>5</sup> The Volga Bulgars and the Bulgars that settled in the Balkans in the same period are of the same Slavic ethnicity. Much as the Huns divided the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, the Khazars divided the Bulgars of the Balkans and the Bulgars along the Middle Volga. Their trajectories diverged. The Volga Bulgars converted to Islam and eventually saw their fortune tied to Russia. The Balkan Bulgars converted to Orthodox Christianity and were tied to the Byzantines and later the Ottomans.

<sup>6</sup> A brief history of the Samanid Emirate and its importance to the account is contained in the chapter on politics.

floated down the Oxus River, to the edge of the civilized Islamic world. There they wintered for several months before venturing into the Western Steppe by camel.



On their journey across the barren lands lying between the Caspian and Aral Seas, the embassy encountered Turkic peoples of many varieties. The chronicler recorded their manner of dress, personal hygiene, pagan religions, sexual mores, superstitions, burial practices and much more. Ibn Fadlan enjoyed the hospitality of Turkic chieftains. The embassy attempted diplomacy and conversion with headmen of high regard. On May 14, 922 CE, the embassy arrived at the encampment of the Volga Bulgars. The Yiltwar<sup>8</sup> Almish was initially pleased with the gifts and speeches of the ambassadors, yet his ire stirred when he learned that the promised funds for the building of the fortifications were missing. No amount of explanation on the part of Ibn Fadlan could assuage the anger of Almish: the straggler was to have brought the funds, but he never

<sup>7</sup> Stewart Gordon, *When Asia Was the World*, (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008) 52.

<sup>8</sup> This is the Slavic Bulghar title that roughly translates to king.

arrived. This disagreement led to the failure of the embassy. Ibn Fadlan recorded a series of conversations with Almish in which the sovereign needled and harangued him for the funds. Almish ultimately questioned the legitimacy of the embassy and accepted that the promised money was lost to him. The alliance between the Bulgars and the Abbasid Caliphate did not materialize.

Following the main body of the account are two digressions. The first concerns the Rus. Ibn Fadlan visited these traders and raiders of Scandinavian origin as they set up a market along the banks of the Volga near the Bulghar settlement. He recorded their daily life, their trading practices, and the highly ceremonial pagan funeral of a chieftain. The second digression concerned the Khazars. Though Ibn Fadlan did not travel through the lands of the Khazars, he included a great deal of information about them. This led many scholars to believe that Ibn Fadlan tacked this section on to the end of his work as an afterthought and that it is highly derivative of other contemporary Islamic historians and geographers.

Historians have studied the account of Ibn Fadlan in a variety of ways. The earliest version of his work to reach a western audience was fragmentary. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Persian geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi (d. 1229 CE) included the portion of the chronicle concerning the Rus in his *Dictionary of Countries*. Several Orientalists translated this passage in the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Articles analyzing the Rus funeral ceremony and comparisons to similar finds in Scandinavia quickly appeared in academic journals. Therefore, the earliest and arguably still the most famous historical research concerning the account is about the Scandinavian chieftain's pagan ship funeral. In fact, director John McTiernan and novelist Michael Crichton dramatically

reenacted this funeral scene for the 1999 film *The 13th Warrior*.<sup>9</sup> Such is the popularity of the dark and pagan rite described therein. This section, while vivid, gruesome and historically important, is not representative of the tone or the overall content of the account. This became apparent when construction workers in Meshed, Persia found the entire manuscript in 1923. Researchers quickly translated the account and found it more complex than a mere recollection of funeral rites.

Historians working with the full account have taken different approaches in analyzing the material. The first scholar to work with the manuscript was the Russian Zeki Togan (d. 1970). Ethnically a Bashkir, one of the Turkic groups encountered by Ibn Fadlan in the chronicle, Togan was interested in what the account revealed about the heritage of Bashkirs, Kipchaks and other Turkic peoples in the regions of what became Russia. Similarly, D.M. Dunlop (d. 1987) translated the section concerning the Khazars in order to include it in his research concerning Judaism.<sup>10</sup> Richard Frye (b. 1920) began writing about the account of Ibn Fadlan in the 1950s, ultimately publishing a full translation with commentary in 2006. Frye approaches the account as a whole without showing preference for a peoples or theme. He used the earlier English translation of James Mc Keithen in composing his work.

The most recent translations and publications have placed Ibn Fadlan's account alongside other Arabic accounts concerning Scandinavians or historically important travelogues. The *rihla*<sup>11</sup> was a mainstay of Islamic literature. Travelogues such as Ibn Fadlan's were popular to Islamic audiences as a personal journey was an important cultural touchstone. The Prophet is

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Crichton used Ibn Fadlan as the outsider/narrator of his dark Viking adventure tale. The author related bits of the original account in order to introduce Ibn Fadlan to the Scandinavian traders. From there, the Abbasid emissary journeys to the Viking homelands to battle unknown evils.

<sup>10</sup> As Ibn Fadlan recorded, the leading families of the Khazars converted to Judaism for political and economic reasons. The exact date and nature of their conversion is still a matter of debate.

<sup>11</sup> A travelogue, but the word also means a journey. It is derived from the word for a camel saddle.

said to have instructed his followers to "seek knowledge, even if you have to travel to China."<sup>12</sup> There is a great tradition of Islamic travelers who chronicled their journeys. Some accounts are known as *al-rihla fi talab al-ilm* meaning travel in the search of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is understandable why publishers package Islamic travel accounts together. The most recent translation of Ibn Fadlan is contained in a volume of Arabic writings on "the land of darkness," while Stewart Gordon of the University of Michigan included Ibn Fadlan among an array of familiar world travelers, such as Xuanzang (d.c. 664 CE) and Ibn Battuta (d.c. 1368 CE). Yet such inclusion does not do the account justice. Framing Ibn Fadlan's account as an interaction with or description of Scandinavians fails to acknowledge the true scope of the work. Indeed, to do so is to continue to view the account as a fragmentary manuscript, ignoring seven-eighths of the text. More than that, it is a lamentably Eurocentric view that minimizes the wealth of information concerning global history. Further, Ibn Fadlan's journey lasted but a short time. He traveled in a relatively small and sparsely populated area compared to others famous for travel accounts. Ibn Battuta traveled the breadth of his known world, as well as the length, spending the whole of his adulthood in the process. Ibn Fadlan's venture was a one-time diplomatic mission lasting little more than a year, not a lifelong personal journey of discovery or spiritual fulfillment. Ibn Fadlan wrote a narrow account of a specific time and place that illuminates the nature of many marginalized societies as well as the details of long distance trade in a time considered dark and backward by a great many. It is distinctive and therefore a valuable resource for Postclassical world history.

The most significant information contained in the account of Ibn Fadlan concerns long distance trade and connectivity and what that says about human networks in the Postclassical

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<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Rihla"

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

period. Rarely has such detail been captured in recording the material and personal interactions required to sustain commerce that traversed thousands of miles, over land, rivers and sea. From the markets on the banks of the Volga, to the formal guest-friend relationship between the Turks of the Western Steppe and Islamic caravan merchants, to the bazaars of Bukhara, to the caravanserais of the Khurasan Road, Ibn Fadlan experienced every station of the northern trade routes. The observations and records he made offer a thorough account of the socio-political and economic mechanics of trade, facilitated by transhumant horse lords and enterprising seamen, which sustained contact between Baghdad and Northern Europe in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

This thesis is broken down into three main sections. Firstly, the account of Ibn Fadlan is set in political context utilizing the text as much as possible. The chronicler did not write much concerning the Abbasid Caliphate. One must have an understanding of the state of affairs in Baghdad, Bukhara, and on the Western Steppe to appreciate the account. Secondly, Ibn Fadlan's religious observations are analyzed. In his time, Islam had not yet fully coalesced. Yet enough is known about Islamic norms to judge his biases concerning Islam as well as the non-Islamic religions he encountered. Lastly, the societal and commercial observations of Ibn Fadlan are all the more meaningful once the account has been sufficiently framed in political and religious context. Political and religious relationships facilitated trade. Yet these themes will overlap by necessity. A total isolation of themes would render the work indecipherable. In that way, this thesis will mirror the account: an interpretation of a foreign time and place to the best of the writer's ability.

## Chapter One- Politics

### Introduction

The political order of the Middle East and Central Asia was in a transitional phase in the time of Ibn Fadlan. Soon the Abbasids would lose all real power and be reduced to religious figureheads by waves of succeeding invaders. This was the last fading bit of twilight for the great dynasty. The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE) had risen to power as a reaction to the popular dissatisfaction of the Islamic world with the rule of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE). The Umayyads, though based in the wealthy Syrian metropolis of Damascus, were of Meccan descent. Their founders came from the elite class of traders in the Hijaz. While they had overseen the rapid expansion of the nascent Islamic state and established political and cultural precedents that would affect policy for centuries to come, they were widely criticized by the *umma*<sup>14</sup> for their lack of piety, corruption and nepotism towards relatives from Mecca. Regardless of their accomplishments, the widespread unhappiness of the base of Islam had swollen significantly.

The opposition Abbasids drew their main power from the disenfranchised peoples of the east: Persia and Central Asia. Persia had been a great power in the Near East since the time of Cyrus the Great (d. c. 530 BCE). Though Persia had known many dynasties and gone by many names, it had remained dominant, withstanding occupation by the Hellenes, invasions by horse nomads, repeated wars with Rome and wars with the successor Byzantine state. Most recently reduced to clients of the Islamic state by military defeat, the Persian elite languished as *mawali*<sup>15</sup> under the patronage of the Umayyads. They marshalled their strength and gathered allies in the greater Islamic world in order to affect a coup, promising a return to piety under the rule of a

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<sup>14</sup> The community-at-large of Islamic believers.

<sup>15</sup> Non-Arab Islamic converts that required Arab sponsors/patrons in order to function in civic life under the Umayyads.

direct relative of the Prophet. Though this relative did not rule as their propaganda had stated, they established long lasting hegemony.

Ibn Fadlan recorded an eclectic mix of political structures and practices in his account. Notably missing is any reference to the condition of the Abbasid Caliphate. The chronicler makes no mention of the affairs of his homeland or of the standing of the Commander of the Faithful.<sup>16</sup> Considering that historians, both contemporary and modern, believe the caliph al-Muqtadir's (r. 908-932 CE) rule was calamitous, a proper context for the embassy is missing. Baghdad in the age of Ibn Fadlan was a corrupt place. Vying aristocratic factions sacrificed the good of the Caliphate for personal gain. The caliph's rivals painted him as a weak and ineffectual ruler. His enemies labeled him a lay-about that kept the counsel and company of women and eunuchs, while they themselves conspired against the central authority of the Caliphate. There is no wonder that the caliph sought out new allies, no matter how far flung or weak, in an era marked by centrifugalism.

Ibn Fadlan interacted with the powerful emir of the Samanid Emirate as well as the shah of Khwarazm. These kingdoms nominally owed their allegiance to the Abbasid Caliphate. Decades of economic growth based on the flow of trade from the north and east as well as jihad against the ever-restless Turkic tribes had drawn traders, raiders and men of letters to their walled citadels. Bukhara rivaled Baghdad in industry, commerce and the arts and was certainly less corrupt than the Abbasid capital. Khwarazm was a polyglot region of exchange between settled Muslims and transhumant Turks that signified the border of the Islamic hegemony. The shah of Khwarazm, as overseer of this link between two worlds and a prime beneficiary of the northern trade routes, desired a more prominent role in the embassy. The shah did not receive his exclusion from the diplomatic process well.

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<sup>16</sup> A name for the caliph.



The steppe was an alien world wherein Ibn Fadlan practiced diplomacy. Ceremonial gift giving was a standard form of international relations and no different on the barren passage between Khwarazm and the encampment of the Volga Bulgars. Establishing a formal guest-friend relationship with Turkic headmen was required to earn passage on the steppe. This the ambassadors accomplished via another familiar form of diplomacy. The giving of silk robes was a long established practice among the Islamic as well as Christian polities of the Near East. By bestowing items upon the Turks that they could not produce themselves, as well as honoring them with clothing, the embassy endeared themselves to the Turkic peoples they encountered.

Ultimately, the embassy failed to perform its duty. While they completed the official ceremony that was their charge, the Bulgar king did not receive the funds the Abbasid Caliphate had promised him. Thus, the alliance between the Abbasids and the Bulgars did not materialize.

### **The Abbasid Court**

In the time of Ibn Fadlan the Abbasid Caliphate was in rapid decline. Initially the Abbasids had ushered in a flourishing period of intellectual output and economic prosperity. The caliph al-Mansur (r.754-775 CE) founded the City of Peace, Baghdad, as the new capital of the Caliphate. Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809 CE) ruled over an era marked by classic literature and extravagant diplomacy with Western powers. His was the age of the *1001 Nights*, the prolific non-fiction writer al-Jahiz, and gift exchange with the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (r. 768-814 CE). Some historians call the Abbasid takeover of the Umayyad Caliphate a revolution. In this sense, the revolution became complacent with newfound prosperity. This is a common theme in world history. As wealth spread into more hands, a growing aristocracy pushed for decentralization. In 909 CE, part of North Africa broke away and formed the Fatimid Caliphate

(909-1171 CE).<sup>17</sup> Caliph al-Muqtadir was a child when this occurred and none of his bickering counselors could do anything to halt such an exodus from the central authority of Baghdad.

Often what is left out of a historical account reveals more than what is recorded. The chronicle of Ibn Fadlan tells us nothing about the reigning caliph al-Muqtadir and the happenings of his court. This may be due to the isolated nature of the Abbasid rulers or it may be due to the controversial nature of his rule. Al-Muqtadir was twenty-six at the time of the embassy but was only thirteen when chosen to succeed his brother al-Muktafi (r. 902- 908 CE) by a council of former viziers and counselors. Historian Hugh Kennedy argued that this was the result of campaigning on the part of Ibn al-Furat (fl. c. 921 CE), who desired a weak government so the nobles would grow more powerful.<sup>18</sup> Ibn al-Furat was a wealthy private financier whose opinions were influential due to the loans he made to the state. In a weakened polity, a private banker stood to gain much. Ibn al-Furat could sway the regulation of lending and profit greatly from unrestrained usury. Al-Muqtadir desired insulation from such potent aristocrats and filled his palace as well as his harem with an unprecedented number of royal princes, advisors, poets, scientists and servants.<sup>19</sup> His enemies interpreted this as indulgence, sloth, and licentiousness. They envisioned him idling away the day in the company of singing women and royal cousins, spoiling in verse and conversations concerning the cosmos with kept men. The contemporary historian al-Masudi (d. 956 CE) portrayed the caliph and his court as:

... inexperienced and eager to indulge in luxuries. He did not concern himself with state affairs, nor did he attend to the matters of the reign; instead, commanders, viziers and secretaries conducted state affairs, in which he did not

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<sup>17</sup> Egypt did not break away until 969 CE.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, (New York: Longman, 1986) 188.

<sup>19</sup> Maaïke Van Berkel, "The Young Caliph and his Wicked Advisors: Women and Power Politics under Caliph Al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932)," *Al-Masaq* 19, No. 1 (March 2007): 6.

have a say or influence, nor was he credited with the qualities of a ruler or administrator.<sup>20</sup>

A high council composed of his mother, his maternal uncle, veteran military advisors, his head chamberlain and skilled eunuchs advised and served al-Muqtadir in matters of state.<sup>21</sup> Even with these relations, he was unable to avoid intrigue and rebellion. His closest non-familial counselor, the chamberlain Nasr, knew the young man to be pious and desirous of making proper decisions, yet he also knew that al-Muqtadir possessed the same shortcomings of all inexperienced youths, making him the proverbial lamb for the slaughter to the likes of Ibn al-Furat.<sup>22</sup> Politically, the result was decentralization and centrifugalism. Ibn al-Furat was able to rally his aristocratic cadre and push for what he desired. Al-Muqtadir's rule would, "prove one of the most disastrous reigns in the whole of Abbasid history."<sup>23</sup>

The role of women as close advisors and administrators in al-Muqtadir's court was a source of derision for his critics. Historian Maaïke Van Berkel characterized the situation thusly: "chroniclers presented the women of the palace, their intrigues and their luxurious life-style as one of the main sources of the misery and despair afflicting the caliphate during this period."<sup>24</sup> The dwellings and apartments of the family of the Abbasid rulers were consolidated in the palace of Baghdad prior to the reign of al-Muqtadir.<sup>25</sup> Al-Muqtadir's mother Shaghab acted in the role of regent until he reached the age of legal majority.<sup>26</sup> She had been a slave girl in the service of al-Muqtadir's father. That a lowborn woman held such power deeply dissatisfied the aristocracy.

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<sup>20</sup> Letizia Osti, "The Wisdom of Youth: Legitimising the Caliph Al-Muqtadir," *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean*, 19:1, 18, DOI: 10.1080/09503110601068430

<sup>21</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, No. 2 (2005): 235.

<sup>22</sup> Letizia Osti, "The Wisdom of Youth: Legitimising the Caliph Al-Muqtadir," *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean*, 19:1, 26, DOI: 10.1080/09503110601068430

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, (New York: Longman, 1986) 188.

<sup>24</sup> Maaïke Van Berkel, "The Young Caliph and his Wicked Advisors: Women and Power Politics under Caliph Al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932)," *Al-Masaq* 19, No. 1 (March 2007): 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 7.

She and the other females of the harem had unfettered access to the young caliph's ear. This perceived feminization of the Commander of the Faithful outraged his already angry rivals. Following al-Muqtadir's mortal wounding in battle in 932 CE, his mother was tortured to death by the incoming caliph in order to mollify her political enemies.<sup>27</sup>

The notion that female influence on the office of the Abbasid caliph and sheer laziness brought about the dynasty's fall in and of itself is a logical fallacy. The very selection of al-Muqtadir as caliph destabilized the monarchy. This was by design. There were several other candidates for caliph discussed by the viziers and the counselors at the time of ascension. A pair of coups occurred upon his naming. Clearly there was no consensus that al-Muqtadir should be the Commander of the Faithful. More importantly, the leader of those who sought to denigrate the authority of the Caliphate, Ibn al-Furat, became vizier to al-Muqtadir on multiple occasions, further weakening centralized power. Between terms as chief advisor, the caliph imprisoned Ibn al-Furat for improper conduct. That such opposition held the purse strings as well as an advisory position over a young caliph he wished to see fail is indicative of a government in its death throes. Ibn al-Furat is as much to blame for the failure of al-Muqtadir and his reign as is any lack of ambition on the young caliph's part. History shows over and over again that empires fail when the nobility dilutes central power and the influence of regional governors grows unchecked.

This introduces another key role of women in the Abbasid court: the office of *qahramana*. The *qahramana* supervised the harem, especially the complex finances required for maintaining the immense royal household. One of her most important duties was that of diplomatic jailer. She saw to the comfort of high-ranking prisoners while they served their term in the palace. One of the several *qahramana* known to have served al-Muqtadir was Zaydan. Her

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<sup>27</sup> Terry Allen, "The Tombs of the Abbasids in Baghdad," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46, No.3, (1983): 424.

professional hospitality and skill at mediation won the admiration of Ibn al-Furat, who came to call her "my sister."<sup>28</sup> She successfully negotiated release terms for Ibn al-Furat that satisfied both parties as well as mediated a dispute between al-Furat and his most hated rival, Ali b. Isa (d. 946 CE). Ali b. Isa was also an aristocrat and sometimes vizier who sought to curb corruption, earning him the rebuke of those weakening the authority of the caliph. Though the mediation between Ibn al-Furat and al-Muqtadir was not ultimately successful, it does indicate the level of respect these independent minded nobles held for a female official of the harem. That Zaydan was an exception to the ire Ibn al-Furat had for women of the court of al-Muqtadir proves that his anger was selective.

The palace of al-Muqtadir was a sprawling complex meant not only to detach the ruler from the populace and potential rivals, but also to house his extensive royal family and those responsible for their welfare. The traditional separation of females in the household necessitated a literal army of servants to care for their needs as well as to guard their virtue. This is clear, given that the harem included not just the concubines and wives of the caliph, as is popularly imagined in the West, but also the unmarried, widowed and divorced women of a broad extended family, including a vast array of children of many ages.<sup>29</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup>-century Arab historian Hilal al-Sabi (d. 1056 CE) recorded that the harem of al-Muqtadir employed:

It is generally believed that in the days of al-Muqtadir... the residence contained 11,000 eunuchs; 7,000 blacks and 4,000 white Slavs<sup>30</sup> ... 4,000 free and slave girls and thousands of chamber servants.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "The Qahramâna in the Abbasid Court: Position and Functions," *Studia Islamica*, No. 97 (2003): 45.

<sup>29</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, No. 2 (2005): 236.

<sup>30</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on eunuchs states that the black eunuchs mostly came from sub-Saharan Africa. They were imported to Egypt as slaves and castrated by Coptic Christians as Islamic law forbade the practice of genital mutilation, but not the use of eunuchs as slaves. Many white eunuchs came from al-Andalus, Jewish merchants acting as middle men in that corner of the Islamic world. On the whole, eunuchs demanded twice the price of a standard slave.

The eunuchs of al-Muqtadir had access to all levels of the palace as they served functions in the harem as well as in the court. Unlike the eunuchs in the rival Byzantine palace, they were not limited to one official function.<sup>32</sup> This involved them in the personal lives of the royal family and his retainers as well as the operation of the Abbasid government. Therefore, the harem of al-Muqtadir was a marriage of the public and private realm.<sup>33</sup> The offices and quarters of those eunuchs employed in state administration were in the harem as they continued to have functions within the greater palace/household structure. Ambitious and tactful eunuchs moved close to the seat of power and earned positions of reliance and prestige. One such eunuch was Nadhir al-Harami (fl. c. 921 CE). Al-Muqtadir entrusted the organization of the embassy to the Volga Bulgars to this eunuch.<sup>34</sup> Though he did not travel with the ambassadors, Nadhir sent a personal client and made all of the arrangements for such a venture, both materially and diplomatically. This indicates just how deeply ingrained the court eunuchs were in the official functions of state. Nadhir also chose those who would make the trek into the northlands. He must have been aware of the importance of the embassy.

For al-Muqtadir and his counselors to acquiesce to the request of the Volga Bulgars they must have hoped to achieve some profit from their investment of treasure and retainers. Though not explicitly stated in the account, it is not difficult to surmise that the waning Abbasid Caliphate was in dire need of allies. The Islamic world fought the Turkic Khazar Khaganate (c. 600-c.1050 CE) off and on for more than a century. Both the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties had fought these steppe horse-lords in bitter conflicts concerning the Caucasus region. Had this

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<sup>31</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, No. 2 (2005): 236.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>33</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "The Qahramâna in the Abbasid Court: Position and Functions," *Studia Islamica*, No. 97 (2003): 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 3.

not been the case, it is possible that the embassy could have taken a far more direct route, to the west of the Caspian Sea. Along with the Byzantine Empire (476-1453 CE), the Khazars represented a dire threat to the northern border of the Caliphate. The Khazars controlled most of the ancient mountain passes leading from the Western Steppe into Mesopotamia. To turn the Volga Bulgars from unwilling clients of the Khazars into Islamic allies would bolster the Abbasid military position. Should the Khazars invade via the Caucasus once more, the allied Volga Bulgars could attack their former master from the rear. As the account of Ibn Fadlan is the only source that records this embassy and its mission, this is but one example of its distinctive worth: revelation of late Abbasid military strategy. Yet the strength of the Bulgars as allies is not fully quantifiable. As will be seen, the amount of effort the Abbasids put into the embassy may reflect how serious they were in establishing this alliance and the viability of such a strategy.

### **The Samanid Court**

The Samanid Emirate of the 10<sup>th</sup> century was the early Postclassical pinnacle of Islamic Central Asia. Not until the Timurid Empire of Tamerlane (d. 1405 CE) did the Central Asian heartland exceed Samanid accomplishments. The modest Sogdian trade city of Bukhara expanded rapidly in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Politically organized as part of the Abbasid Khurasan province, the city nominally owed its allegiance to the provincial capital city of Merv.<sup>35</sup> Islam was slow to spread in Central Asia, at least, slower than in other parts of the Islamic conquest.<sup>36</sup> Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity and other religions found adherents in the crossroads region. Traders, raiders and missionaries from Greece to China had passed through the region since at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Hearts and minds were a difficult commodity to

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Frye, *Bukhara: The Medieval Achievement*, (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1996) 30.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

control when such a variety of beliefs existed side by side. Those who converted to Islam and showed loyalty to the caliph received titles and land. Being an arid region that thrived on land fed by oases, arable land was a fixed and highly valued reward. This tactic drew many converts. Such were the Tahirids, whose eponymous founder became a general for the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (r.813-833 CE). These early dynasts were responsible for the "formation of New Persian language and literature."<sup>37</sup> They centered their polity in Nishapur and made it a haven for writers that transformed and integrated Persian and Arabic into a stylistically pleasing poetic tool. Such political and cultural success inspired other Central Asian aristocrats to convert and to enter the administrative world of Islam. The successors to the Tahirids were not Persian by heritage, but were quite familiar with Persian practices. They came from beyond the Oxus River.

Saman (fl. early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE) was a "petty prince"<sup>38</sup> of the Bactria/Transoxiana region who grew in esteem upon his conversion to Islam. Like Tahir (d. 822 CE), the descendants of Saman flourished under the patronage of al-Ma'mun. Circa 820 CE, al-Ma'mun appointed four of Saman's grandsons, all brothers, as governors to the Sogdian oasis cities of Samarqand, Fergana, Tashkent and Herat.<sup>39</sup> The family held their large territory together through Turkish incursions and Sogdian infighting. The great hero of the Samanid dynasty was Ismail (d. 907 CE). He defeated his rebellious brother and united all of the Samanid cities and territories into one kingdom that stretched beyond Sogdia. Nominally an emirate under clientage to the Abbasid Caliphate, their remote locale gave Ismail a great deal of autonomy. Contemporary written sources described him as "a man of great piety and a model of a prince."<sup>40</sup> His victories, his

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 42.



artistic patronage, and his enlightened rule are comparable to those of his near contemporaries Charlemagne and Harun al-Rashid.

Revolts ferment in the times of sickly monarchs and boy kings, as seen with the controversy surrounding the ascension of al-Muqtadir. Nasr b. Ahmad (r. 914-943 CE), too, was a boy king. His unpopular father, the successor of Ismail, was murdered by his own slaves. This thrust the boy onto the throne at the age of eight. He survived several coups and, with the guidance of an excellent vizier, still reigned when Ibn Fadlan and his embassy stayed in Bukhara. Though either sixteen or seventeen at the time of the visit,<sup>41</sup> he was practiced in statecraft. Nasr listened to the correspondence from al-Muqtadir and graciously conceded to every request. He did not exhibit an air of haughty independence. Ibn Fadlan wrote that Nasr replied to the reading of the letter from al-Muqtadir by saying, "I hear and obey the order of our lord, the Commander of the Faithful—may God prolong his existence!"<sup>42</sup>

Though an emir, a vassal to the caliph, Nasr and the Samanids had grown in power and prestige, enough to rival Baghdad. Bukhara was enjoying a Golden Age in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, just as the Abbasids of Baghdad had two centuries before. The vizier of Nasr<sup>43</sup> was Jaihani, known in his time for his geographical opus *Book of Roads and Kingdoms*. This work is lost, but it does indicate the high level of knowledge and education of the vizier to the young emir. The contrast between the advisor to Nasr and the plotters advising al-Muqtadir is marked. Bukhara continued to flourish in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, producing the polymath Ibn Sina (d.1037 CE). He described the philosophical and educational environment as vibrant. Chinese paper had so

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<sup>41</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 224.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn Fadlan calls him a *katib*, which Richard Frye believes is more closely associated with the office of prime minister.

permeated Central Asia that books were readily available. Ibn Sina painted a lively picture of the book bazaar:

One day in the afternoon when I was in the bookseller's quarter a dealer approached with a book in his hand which he was calling out for sale. He offered it to me, but I refused it with disgust, believing that there was no merit in this science.<sup>44</sup> But he said to me, 'Buy it, because the owner needs the money and so it is cheap. I will sell it to you for three dirhams.' So I bought it.<sup>45</sup>

Ibn al-Furat sabotaged the mission to the Volga Bulgars, according to Ibn Fadlan. The embassy lingered in Bukhara for nearly a month. They were waiting on the arrival of fellow ambassador Ahmad b. Musa, who was to receive the revenues of a certain estate in Khwarazm belonging to a client of Ibn al-Furat. These revenues were to pay for the embassy at large as well as to supply the Volga Bulgars the funds necessary to build a fortress and mosque. Ibn Fadlan wrote:

The news reached Ibn Fadl Musa, the Christian, Ibn al-Furat's agent, and he used a trick to deal with Ahmad b. Musa. He wrote as follows to the heads of Public Security along the Khwarazm Road from the military district of Sarakhs [east of Nishapur] to Baykand [southwest of Bukhara]: 'Keep your eyes peeled for Ahmad b. Musa al-Khwarazmi in the caravanserais and customs posts. If you run across him, lock him up until you receive our letter about the matter.' He was in fact caught in Merv and put in jail.<sup>46</sup>

After waiting nearly a month for his arrival, the embassy decided to leave and let Ahmad b. Musa catch up with them once he arrived and completed his transaction. They were concerned that the onset of winter would slow them if they tarried further.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The book in question was al-Farabi's commentary on Aristotle's writings concerning the practice of medicine. Of it, Ibn Sina said, "Medicine is not one of the difficult sciences, and therefore, I excelled in it in a very short time, to the point that distinguished physicians began to read the science of medicine under me."

<sup>45</sup> Stewart Gordon, *When Asia was the World: Traveling Merchants, Scholars, Warriors, and Monks who Created "The Riches of the East,"* (Philadelphia: DeCapo Press, 2008) 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

This passage is controversial because it raises so many questions that have no definitive answers. These questions are all that more troubling given that the funds were so necessary to the ultimate success or failure of the embassy. Ahmad b. Musa was supposed to have left a week after the main body of the embassy.<sup>48</sup> When asked of his whereabouts by the emir Nasr, Ibn Fadlan replied, "'We left him in the City of Peace (Baghdad). He was supposed to set out five days after us,' we told him."<sup>49</sup> No one sought him out along the road, backtracking along the path the embassy had taken. After two weeks resting in Bukhara, a few of them could have gone looking for this vital component of the embassy, but no one did. At least, Ibn Fadlan did not say that anyone searched for him. The embassy then decided to go on without Ahmad b. Musa. They went to Khwarazm hoping he would catch up, yet they entered the steppe knowing he would not arrive. Granted, many turned back at that point.<sup>50</sup> Ibn Fadlan recorded that the jurist, the teacher and their pages would not enter the land of the Turks for fear of the unknown country. Perhaps they turned back because they were not paid, or worse, they feared the wrath of an unhappy barbarian king. This is total conjecture; Ibn Fadlan stated flatly that it was fear of the steppe. Those that stayed, excepting Ibn Fadlan, were unconcerned with the missing funds. Ibn Fadlan wrote that his companions said, "'Don't worry about that,' they said to me, 'he won't ask us for it.'"<sup>51</sup> This is utterly confounding. Either Ibn Fadlan was the only sane diplomat in a group of fools or he was writing an apologetic for a failed expedition. He could only have learned the tale of the imprisonment of Ahmad b. Musa upon his return.

This passage illustrates the weakness of al-Muqtadir's regime. Ibn al-Furat defied the caliph yet again. The powerful aristocrat and his clients thwarted the embassy while still well

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

within lands under Abbasid dominion. Worse still, low level functionaries, the jurists and teachers, quit the embassy, seemingly with no fear punishment from the caliph or his administrators. Further, the fact that the embassy did not carry the dirhams with them from the outset indicates that the Caliphate was low on available coins or unwilling to part with them for the purposes of the embassy. The caliph was willing to gamble on the outcome. This shows a lack of commitment to the success of the embassy or an inability to ensure the success of the embassy. Either way, it is another indicator of Abbasid weakness and a symptom of their demise.

### **Khwarazm**

Khwarazm was a small polity centered on the lowland delta of the Oxus River as it entered the Aral Sea. The kingdom represented the northeastern edge of the Islamic world. It bordered desert, sea and steppe. Though much changed today due to the evaporation of the Aral Sea and erosion, the region was much more fertile in antiquity and the Postclassical period. Indeed, the area once had an abundance of fish laden waters and canal irrigated fields. In the time of Ibn Fadlan, Khwarazm was the entrepôt for goods on the northern trade route. Islamic merchants left the market towns of Khwarazm, crossed the steppe in camel caravans, traded with the Volga Bulgars and other northern peoples, and then returned to sell their wares in Khwarazm's bazaars. Furs, amber, honey and other northern luxuries traveled on to Bukhara via the Oxus River and overland caravans. From the major trade nexus of Bukhara, these goods entered the Silk Road system. While remote, the significance of Khwarazm to long distance trade in luxury goods made it a relatively wealthy kingdom through taxation of commerce.

Before setting foot upon the steppe, Ibn Fadlan had to convince the shah of Khwarazm, Muhammad b. Iraq, that he had the authority to establish an embassy with the Volga Bulgars. As a vassal of the ruler of Khurasan, Muhammad b. Iraq was sworn to protect the interests of his patron. He also had interests of his own. The shah believed that the emir of Bukhara, young

Nasr, had more authority to establish a northern embassy, saying, "The noble emir— that is, the emir of Khurasan— would have more right to have the prayers read in his name of the Commander of the Faithful in that country, if he thought it advisable."<sup>52</sup> He went on to say that innumerable tribes of pagans inhabited the lands between Khwarazm and the Volga Bulgars. He implied that the proximity of Khurasan to the northlands and their relationship with the Turks gave them precedence. He asked the ambassadors to return to Bukhara to receive papers from Nasr that would allow them passage in the Samanid ruler's name. Ibn Fadlan reiterated that he had received proper permissions from both the Commander of the Faithful in Baghdad as well as Nasr in Bukhara. This did not achieve the results he wanted; the shah remained obstinate. Khwarazm was not receiving its proper due. Ibn Fadlan set about flattering the shah and bided his time quietly until Muhammad b. Iraq relented.

This episode is another example of the caliph's loss of power on the periphery of the Islamic world. A minor king's<sup>53</sup> ability to refuse an order from the Abbasid ruler of Baghdad is a prime indicator of centrifugalism. It was in Khwarazm that the settled Muslims and those Turks that offered hospitality on the steppe had the most direct interaction. Surely, Muhammad b. Iraq was trying to protect his interests in this area. The shah's pride was bruised by being excluded; this was his sphere of influence and he would have his say. Persian studies specialist Michael Fedorov argued that scholars in Central Asian studies too often ignore the Banu Iraq dynasty of Khwarazm. Their prominence grew alongside the Samanids and for similar reasons. Their polyglot settlements grew wealthy from trade and such wealth attracted the same elements as it

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<sup>52</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 7.

<sup>53</sup> In the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was the shah of Khwarazm that disrespected the Mongols and instigated their invasion of the Middle East, culminating in the destruction of Baghdad.

had in Bukhara and Baghdad. Indeed, as the Samanid Golden Age waned in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Banu Iraq challenged their hegemony politically and militarily.<sup>54</sup>

### The Steppe

The loose political structure of the Ghuzz<sup>55</sup> Turks and the other transhumant tribal peoples that inhabited the Western Steppe was alien to Ibn Fadlan. In describing it, he quoted a sura from the Quran: "Their political regime is based on consultation among themselves."<sup>56</sup> Read in context, the sura is not an admonishment or an endorsement of such an arrangement, but a poetic use of the Quran in recounting the practices of the Ghuzz. The suras that surround the one quoted concern the omnipotence of Allah; his will transcends, no matter the outcome. Perhaps this was a way of saying that he did not understand the ways of the Ghuzz, but their *wrf*<sup>57</sup> must be the will of Allah, as all things happen according to Allah's spoken creation. Ibn Fadlan came to learn that the Ghuzz indeed ruled by tribal councils and consultations among headmen.

Inal the Younger was the first Turkic chieftain with which the embassy had contact. Inal confessed to the ambassadors that he had once converted to Islam, but had since renounced the faith, because his tribesmen had said to him, "If you become Muslim, you will no longer be our leader."<sup>58</sup> Further, Inal refused to allow the embassy to continue because he had never heard of an Abbasid embassy traveling so far north and had never conceived of such a thing.<sup>59</sup> Brought to

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Fedorov, "The Khwarazmshahs of the Banū 'Irāq (Fourth/Tenth Century)," *Iran* 38 (2000): 73.

<sup>55</sup> This thesis uses the terms Turk and Turkic to describe those transhumant peoples living on the Western Steppe. The majority of those encountered by Ibn Fadlan were Ghuzz Turks. The Ghuzz were the majority ethnic group of the region in which Ibn Fadlan traveled and their successors were the Seljuks that successfully invaded Mesopotamia and Anatolia. Ibn Fadlan also encountered Bashkirs and Pechenegs and likely other tribal groupings. The Khazars were the major Turkic ethnic group that bordered the Ghuzz to the west. They are not discussed in depth in this thesis as the information given by Ibn Fadlan concerning the Khazars is very likely not his own and certainly not a firsthand account.

<sup>56</sup> Quran 42:38

<sup>57</sup> This is an Islamic concept that refers to indigenous customs that predate a society's acceptance of Islam.

<sup>58</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 17.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

a halt, the ambassadors gifted Inal with a fine caftan, unsewn cloth, bread and small amounts of nuts and raisins.<sup>60</sup> Inal lamented that his tents and flocks were not nearer so that he could return such hospitality in kind. He relented to their request to pass on.<sup>61</sup>

Such ritual gift giving was a well-established practice by the cultures of the region by the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In order for Inal to project his nomadic hegemony, it was incumbent upon him to exact some manner of tribute from the large caravan. Ibn Fadlan stated five thousand men, three thousand horses and unlisted numbers of camels and other accoutrements as traveling with the caravan.<sup>62</sup> The paltry size of the tribute in relation to the length of the caravan seems wildly disproportional at first glance. In context, the items were rather luxurious to transhumant people, particularly bread. As nomadic pastoralists, they did not plant or harvest. Bread was a rare treat. In order to keep face before his tribe, a fine prize was also required before he could allow the caravan to pass. The caftan served as that prize. Gifting of robes and textiles to nomads was mutually beneficial. The transhumant lords perceived them as valued objects and the Islamic traders were familiar with such a practice in their own culture.

The Byzantines, the Arabs and tribal peoples were inheritors of a tradition rooted in the Silk Road trade system. Rulers and the nobility valued silks in every culture they entered. Said silks journeyed along the overland routes from China through Central Asia and terminated in Syrian ports. Prior to the Arab conquest of Syria, the Byzantines had profited from this lucrative trade. Further, the Byzantines were adept crafters of silk garments and used them in diplomacy, a practice widely emulated in the region. Giving and receiving 'robes of honor' was everyday diplomacy. Textile manufacture and trade were in the heart and soul of early Islam. The family

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

of the Prophet and the city of Mecca were heavily involved in textiles. The fertile region of Yemen grew cotton, which they spun into fine cloth. Now controlling the silk as well as cotton industries in the region, the Islamic polities all but monopolized textile trade. The historian al-Baladhuri (d. 892 CE) recorded that tribute and taxes were payable to the Abbasid caliph in the form of textiles.<sup>63</sup> In particular, the Christian community in the Islamic majority region of Najran manufactured silk robes that ended up in the hands of the caliphs in the form of tribute.<sup>64</sup> Deposited in the treasury of Baghdad, the caliph distributed them as diplomatic gifts at his discretion.<sup>65</sup>

The embassies next meeting with a Turkic chieftain reveals much more concerning diplomacy. Named Atrak, Ibn Fadlan described him as the military commander of the Ghuzz. This indicates the tenuous grasp the chronicler had on the murky constitution of their transhumant society. Based on his description of Atrak's camp being much larger and Atrak as possessing more followers and servants, perhaps Ibn Fadlan assumed that Atrak was leading a military force when he was in fact nothing more than a wealthy chieftain with many followers. Atrak prepared tent lodgings for the ambassadors and invited them to a dinner of lamb, to which he had also invited his extended family. Before arriving, the ambassadors sent ahead gifts of, "clothing, raisins, walnuts, pepper and millet."<sup>66</sup> As with the foodstuffs gifted to Inal the Younger, these items were luxuries to the nomads. They did not have the time or the climate to raise grain and vines, nor tend nut trees or trade for spices. Such diplomatic gift giving is as old as diplomacy itself: to offer ones neighbors those things that they cannot make themselves.

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<sup>63</sup> Anthony Cutler, "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55, (2001): 262.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 19.



After the dinner, when the party had dispersed for the night, Ibn Fadlan returned to the abode of Atrak along with an interpreter. He took with him a letter from Nadir al- Harami, the eunuch who had organized the embassy. The correspondence entreated Atrak to convert to Islam. To persuade him, Nadhir sent the Ghuzz chieftain fifty gold dinars, the equivalent of twelve modern grams of musk,<sup>67</sup> tanned leather, cloth, slippers, a brocade robe and five silk garments. The ambassador cut the raw cloth, probably cotton or wool, into two tunics. Nadhir included a veil and a ring for the chieftain's wife. Atrak advised Ibn Fadlan that he would give his decision concerning his conversion when the embassy passed through on their journey home.<sup>68</sup> Since there is no record of the return passage, the outcome is unknown.

This passage is elusive. Ibn Fadlan did not mention that he had a letter for a Turkic chieftain at the outset of his work. He treated this episode as an aside with little consequence. Yet the gifts signify much more, as Atrak was the father in law of the king of the Volga Bulgars. Why he chose to reveal this relationship later in the account is confusing, as the initial reading causes one to assume he is presenting a random chieftain with fine gifts. This passage does reveal the existence of not only diplomatic marriage on the steppe, but also diplomatic marriage between settled Bulgars and Turkic peoples. Atrak's opinion concerning his son-in-law was important enough, and he was powerful enough a chieftain, to ply with gifts so that he would not interfere with the embassy and its mission.

In the time of al-Muqtadir, robes of honor were not as readily available as they had been in the reign of Harun al- Rashid. His court did not have the wealth of the powerful potentates of the past, as evidenced by his indebtedness to Ibn al-Furat. Al-Muqtadir stored ornate silk robes,

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<sup>67</sup> Three mithqals.

<sup>68</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 20.

those intended for gifting, in the homes of trusted nobles so he could plead unpreparedness to those guests he could not afford to honor.<sup>69</sup> That Ibn Fadlan carried such robes with him and that Nadhir directed him to give them to Atrak indicates a serious effort on the part of the Abbasids to engender good relations with the Ghuzz Turks. The secrecy is uncharacteristic of the rest of the chronicle. That Ibn Fadlan went at night with only an interpreter is an anomaly not repeated in the rest of the work.

A bit of political posturing and saber rattling on the part of the Ghuzz Turks occurred before Atrak allowed the embassy to complete its mission. The Turkic chieftain called in his closest companions, among them Inal the Younger whom Ibn Fadlan had already met. The chronicler acknowledged that the greatest among those assembled was Tarkhan: "He limped, was blind and had a crippled hand."<sup>70</sup> The suffix of khan indicates that he was an overlord of some sort. Atrak informed those gathered of the intentions of the ambassadors: to establish an embassy with his son-in-law Almish. The gathered warlords and lesser chieftains debated whether to let the caravan pass or to hand the embassy over to the Khazars in exchange for their own long-suffering diplomatic hostages. The exchange of diplomatic hostages is perhaps the oldest of political treaties. Some of the Ghuzz argued to ransack the caravan and leave the emissaries naked and alone on the steppe. This line of debate led to Tarkhan receiving a wide array of clothing and foodstuffs as gifts. The lesser headmen received more gifts as well, until the Ghuzz allowed the caravan to pass.

This passage reveals several things concerning the interaction between settled Muslims and transhumant Turks. Richard Frye believed that the Ghuzz found amusement in "the

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<sup>69</sup> Anthony Cutler, "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55, (2001): 263.

<sup>70</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 21.

discomfiture and fear among the embassy members."<sup>71</sup> The formality and ceremony exhibited by the ambassadors most likely appeared quite absurd to the nomads. One can envision the Ghuzz making idle threats and joking over bowls of *kumis*.<sup>72</sup> Alternately, the presence of a trade caravan and ambassadors willing to give gifts was a prime occasion for needling goods out of the rich traders that traversed the lands of the Ghuzz. This was steppe diplomacy. Further, the ambassadors were no ordinary merchants, with whom norms were established. The Ghuzz headmen knew well that the Abbasids had never sent an embassy so far north before, their camels laden with gifts, and they took all available advantage.

### **Volga Bulgars**

The Yiltwar Almish received the embassy with grace and they returned his hospitality in kind. After seventy days on the steppe, the ambassadors arrived at the settlement of the Volga Bulgars. The site on the river likely evolved into what is the modern Russian city of Kazan in Tatarstan, as the Bulgars are widely believed to be the ancestors of the Tatars. Almish greeted the emissaries by showering them with coins that he had hidden in his voluminous caftan sleeves. He then had tents set up for the Abbasids and allowed them to rest and rejuvenate for four days before performing the official reception ceremony. On the day of the formal greeting, Ibn Fadlan dressed Almish in the black robes and turban of an Abbasid royal and flanked his seat with the black banners that represented the Abbasid Caliphate. This symbolically connected the far-flung polity with the Islamic capital. Gathered in the yiltwar's sprawling tent, Ibn Fadlan read letters to Almish: one from al-Muqtadir and another from his vizier Hamid b. al-Abbas.<sup>73</sup> Coins

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<sup>71</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 95.

<sup>72</sup> Fermented mare's milk. A mainstay beverage on the steppe.

<sup>73</sup> Hamid b. al-Abbas was the wealthy tax farmer that served as vizier to al-Muqtadir who famously had the controversial and outspoken Sufi theologian and poet Mansur al-Hallaj crucified in 922 CE. Ibn Fadlan was traveling at the time. Ibn al-Furat was serving a sentence in the harem.

were then scattered over Almish by his personal retainers in celebration. Ibn Fadlan lastly gifted robes and pearls to the wife of Almish. The court of Almish and the ambassadors shared a feast and all were pleased with the new alliance.

Relations quickly deteriorated. The congenial nature of the rotund ruler turned sour when he learned of the four thousand dinars that did not arrive with the embassy. An interpreter of the yiltwar read the letters and related parts to Almish that Ibn Fadlan had omitted. Almish confronted the ambassador, angrily throwing the letters at Ibn Fadlan and dismissing his excuses, saying:

You all came together and my master [al-Muqtadir] paid all your expenses, and the only reason was so that you could bring me this money to have a fortress built to protect me from the Jews [Khazars]<sup>74</sup>, who have tried to reduce me to slavery. As regards the presents, my ghulam<sup>75</sup> [messenger] could perfectly well have brought them.<sup>76</sup>

This excerpt sums up the failure of the embassy. As far as Almish was concerned, the alliance with the Abbasids was a military alliance. The conversion to Islam was a concession to bind them more closely. Without the funds and the fortress, the Volga Bulgars ability to resist the Khazars was nil. The embassy tarried for months and Ibn Fadlan continually attempted to assuage the anger of the jilted ruler. He flattered him, praising the "unlimited funds"<sup>77</sup> he surely collected from his large kingdom. Almish said that he could in fact build a fortress if he so desired, but wanted Abbasid funds to do so as a sign "of the blessing which is attached to money coming from the Commander of the Faithful."<sup>78</sup> This exchange smacks of repairing wounded feelings and saving face. Whether Almish could have built the fortress he desired without the aid

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<sup>74</sup> The noble classes of the Khazars had converted to Judaism centuries prior.

<sup>75</sup> The multiple meanings of *ghulam* is discussed in the section on society.

<sup>76</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 29.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Abbasid Caliphate is ultimately unknown. The damage to diplomatic relations was done. If al-Muqtadir or any of his advisors had truly desired an alliance with the Volga Bulgars, they had not given their best showing.

### **Conclusion**

Politically speaking, the account of Ibn Fadlan is a dichotomy between the known and the unknown. He assumes that the reader is aware of the realities of the Abbasid Caliphate. His audience was likely composed of members of the administration as well as those educated well enough and connected well enough to understand the motivations and players. The same can be said about the Samanid Emirate. Ibn Fadlan does not go into detail concerning the major players in that arena either. What he does relate in detail are the interactions with the Ghuzz and the Bulgars. Interactions with these unknown political entities were recorded with detail. These were the people he was sent to parlay with and to form an alliance. Yet to understand why he was sent and what importance an alliance with the Bulgars or the conversion of a Ghuzz chieftain carries, one must know the political context of the day to come as close to being a member of his intended audience as possible. In this way, the assumptions he makes about his audience aid in comprehension and one may move forward to deeper themes.

## Chapter Two- Religion

### Introduction

Ibn Fadlan keenly observed the religions of the peoples with whom he interacted. He recorded the practices of Muslims as well as those of other traditions. As a scholar of sharia, he no doubt held intellectual curiosity as well as a believer's hope for the conversion of the uninitiated. He witnessed ceremonies performed by the Scandinavians, rites he considered backward and naive.<sup>79</sup> He also observed the animism, nature worship and Tengri worship of the Turks. Though his Islamic bias kept him from deeper inquiry into the pagan rites he encountered, his account is a precious record. Neither the Scandinavians nor the Turks of the 10<sup>th</sup> century kept religious texts. The Scandinavians were a nearly illiterate society, the Turks wholly so. In this way, Ibn Fadlan is a distinct historian of world religions as it records the indigenous rites of peoples on the verge of conversion to major monotheistic religions.

Ibn Fadlan revealed much concerning the state of Islam in his day. He was a Sunni, as was the majority of the Muslim world, though Islam was still forming as a belief system in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. As such, he instructed the Bulgars in the way of Sunnism as he knew it. The passages concerning the wording of the *khutba* and the calls to prayer relate his understanding of sharia.<sup>80</sup> In his travels, Ibn Fadlan came across hostile Shiites as well as those who cursed Shiites. Exploring the where and why of such curses offers a benchmark for the state of Shi'ism in the eastern frontier in 921 CE. The lack of mention of Sufism in the account seems to

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<sup>79</sup>Ibn Fadlan called the Scandinavians that traded on the banks of the Volga Rus. Many professionals and nonprofessionals alike call them Vikings. Neither is apt. The word Viking carries meaning in the West that does not apply to those mentioned in this account. The word Viking evokes images of Danes and Norwegians sacking the British Isles and Ireland. The Swedish-borne Rus, the word Ibn Fadlan used, founded the kingdom of Kiev and the region surrounding Lake Ladoga. This is not to say that elements of the Rus were not part of the trade on the Volga, but to label them all Rus would be incorrect. The traders on the Volga were surely of Scandinavian origin, but Finns, Slavs and other traders and raiders of various Eastern ethnic groups likely made up the crews of these trading enterprises as well.

<sup>80</sup>The *khutba* is the sermon given in the main mosque during the Friday midday gathering.

contradict the standard narrative of conversion on the Western Steppe. Ibn Fadlan did not record a single *khanqah*<sup>81</sup> on the edge of the steppe or even a lone Muslim mystic among the Turks. Finally, Ibn Fadlan was deeply interested in the death rites of the peoples he encountered. He witnessed Islamic, Bulghar, Scandinavian and Turkic funerals in his travels and recorded the details of each. The Scandinavian and Ghuzz had similar practices and beliefs while the Muslims and pagan Bulgars diverged.

### **The Scandinavians**

Ibn Fadlan observed cultic sacrifices as practiced by the Scandinavians. He recorded that the traders, on first arrival to the market town of the Bulgars, gathered up various foodstuffs and went immediately to a pre-existing place of sacrifice. In that place were wooden posts with carved faces as well as smaller figurines, perhaps totems, scattered on the ground. There the traders offered the foodstuffs to the idols and said, "I would like you to do the favor of sending me a merchant who has large quantities of dinars and dirhams and who will buy everything that I want and not argue with me over the price."<sup>82</sup> Should the merchants find difficulty in trading, they returned to the site and offered more sacrifices to the effigies. If their transactions went smoothly, Ibn Fadlan reported that the traders slaughtered sheep or cattle at the site, leaving the heads of the sacrifices on wooden stakes among the totems, as well as offerings of meat. Overnight the meat disappeared and the traders said, "My lord is pleased with me and has eaten the gift I brought him."<sup>83</sup> Ibn Fadlan was quick to point out that dogs most likely devoured the offering in the night, not the Scandinavian deities.

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<sup>81</sup> A Sufi hostel, much like a Christian monastery of the same period.

<sup>82</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 48.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

The Scandinavian religion of the pre-Christian era has been difficult to define. A major source for these beliefs is the *Prose Edda*.<sup>84</sup> The important Icelandic figure Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241 CE) famously produced the *Prose Edda* as a handbook for skalds. These Nordic poets required a text that immortalized their dying oral traditions in order to continue their art. Sturluson's work codified the mythology of the Scandinavians pagan past. In the *Prose Edda*, the author identified their pantheon of deities, strange races, and cosmology, as well as the legends and deeds of gods and heroes. Yet his work postdated the actual practice of the old religion by hundreds of years. The practical rites and daily routine of the pagan past was lost. For information regarding rituals, like those observed by Ibn Fadlan, one must look to archaeology and the accounts of those who encountered the pre-Christian Scandinavians.

Other than the biased outsider accounts such as Ibn Fadlan's, much of what historians know concerning Scandinavian rituals comes from well-preserved artifacts found at sacrificial sites. These articles come from votive offerings, whether deposited in lakes, bogs or buried hoards. Yet intentional, ritual destruction of inherently useful items is only one aspect of what was a loose and varied system of ceremonies. The Scandinavian religion was not a fixed canon of rules. Regional variation and seasonal stressors surely affected practice. Suffice to say, disparate peoples with disparate resources required several forms of sacrifice in order to feel that they had made proper observances. Indeed, Richard Frye believed that sacrifices to wooden idols as described by Ibn Fadlan were not performed in Scandinavia during the Viking Age.<sup>85</sup> One could extrapolate further and suggest that the ceremony that Ibn Fadlan witnessed was an amalgam of rites practiced by the several peoples that made up their trading confederations in the East. Yet there still may have been a Scandinavian origin to the rite.

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<sup>84</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Bycock, (New York: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>85</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 107.



What Ibn Fadlan believed a base act of idolatry, some modern scholars recognize as a cultic practice. Archaeological study of Scandinavia has revealed the existence of cultic houses from as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.<sup>86</sup> The findings of the cultic house at Borg in Ostergotland, Sweden offer an excellent example for comparison. A small representation of a deity resided inside a small, sacred cabin, resting on a raised stone platform. Archaeologists found that the area before the door to the cabin had been paved with fire-cracked stones. Beneath the stones, the faithful had buried hundreds of amulets. Fitted between the stones, "there were huge quantities of bones from horses and livestock, and also occasional bones from wild animals such as red deer, elk, fox, and probably wolf."<sup>87</sup> The dating of the find is to the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. It would not be a stretch to imagine the cultists of Sweden placing the sacrificed animal heads on stakes before the door to the cultic cabin and indeed the illustrator of an article concerning the site did just that. That the Scandinavians who traded on the Volga came from the same region as the location of this cultic house is no great surprise. Certainly, the ceremonies that Ibn Fadlan observed could have been a mix of Scandinavian and local. The presence of extremely similar cultic practices in the Scandinavian homeland indicates that the religion of those Ibn Fadlan called Rus traveled with them from Sweden. That the account captures this is remarkable.

### **The Turks**

Ibn Fadlan encountered Ghuzz with a lukewarm affiliation towards Islam on his journey. He wrote, "I have heard them say, 'There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God' to make a good impression on the Muslims who stay with them, but they do not believe in

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<sup>86</sup> Anders Andren, "Behind 'Heathendom': Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion," *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 27, No. 2 (2005): 112.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

this firmly."<sup>88</sup> He said this because he observed an equal if not more powerful affection these Ghuzz felt toward Tengri and nature spirits. Their respect for Allah was simply good manners toward their guest-friends. One of the features of the shamanistic steppe religions is syncretism. The spirits and deities of the steppe were not mutually exclusive. Allah was welcome to join in the fluid pantheon of the Turks. Out of courtesy for their Islamic gift givers, they may have said what Ibn Fadlan observed for a night or two at a time.

The vast majority of the various Turkic peoples practiced Tengrism. Tengri was the "supreme celestial deity" of steppe peoples, but was also the embodiment of the sky.<sup>89</sup> Like so many peoples before them, the sky represented that which dominates everything from above, especially on a flat landscape unbroken for leagues on end. They also venerated the fertility goddess Umay and Yol Tengri, the personification of fate.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the earlier Scythians and Sarmatians, the Ghuzz, as well as the Khazars, were of Altaic origin, meaning their ancestors came from the mountains of Northeast Asia. Thus, they shared similar cultural and religious features with the later Mongols, continuators of Tengrism.

Among the Bashkir, Ibn Fadlan encountered nature worship, which was wholly syncretic and compatible with Tengrism. The Bashkir told Ibn Fadlan of the nature spirits called the Twelve Lords and he enumerated them thusly: winter, summer, rain, wind, trees, men, horses, water, night, day, death and sky. These forces are universal, yet the sparseness of the spirits and their basic nature speak to the primal needs of those on the steppe. Many are the antithesis of the other in couplets. Ibn Fadlan wrote, "The Lord who is the Sky is the most powerful of them, but he is in concord with the others, so that he approves what his companion does. God is infinitely

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<sup>88</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 12.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 42.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

above the beliefs of these lost souls!"<sup>91</sup> The Lord of the Sky is obviously Tengri, while not named. That he approves of the other's actions indicates that he is not only superior to the others but that he directs the others. Ibn Fadlan's admonishment of the non-believer's polytheism at the end of the passage comes from the Quran.<sup>92</sup>

Among the Bashkir Ibn Fadlan also observed, "a clan that worships snakes and another that worships fish and another that worships cranes."<sup>93</sup> Those that worshipped cranes told him that a group of cranes had once frightened away their enemies. This is, of course, an observation made through Ibn Fadlan's Islamic eyes. Like his opinion concerning nature spirits, his Islamic education shaded his views so drastically that it is difficult to see an unbiased picture or know if he is reporting a full account. Veneration of nature spirits and animism is practiced in Asia to this day. The harsh living environment of the steppe lends itself to animism. Competition for resources being nearly equal for men and beasts, "it is reasonable to expect, animism can only really flourish where societal relations as a whole are horizontal in character."<sup>94</sup> This means that pastoralists more acutely feel for both the fortunes of wild animals and the vicissitudes of nature as they have virtually no safety net, just like the beasts of the steppe. As such, the religion of the Turks, "conceptualizes a continuity between humans and nonhumans,"<sup>95</sup> and a belief that, "all natural objects and phenomena are endowed with spiritual power all the time."<sup>96</sup> The identification of Tengri by Ibn Fadlan and a basic grasp of animism and nature worship indicates

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<sup>91</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 24.

<sup>92</sup> Sura 17:42

<sup>93</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 24.

<sup>94</sup> Morten Pedersen, "Totemism, Animism and North Asian Indigenous Ontologies," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7, No. 3 (September 2001): 416.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 414.

that at least the very well connected and educated of Baghdad had a sense of the beliefs of the Ghuzz in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, had they read the account of Ibn Fadlan.

### **Sufi Islam**

The prevailing wisdom on the matter of Turkic Islamification is that Sufi mystics acted as missionizing agents on the frontiers. Their malleable, esoteric views of cosmology and the personal nature of the relationship between the believer and Allah is believed to have been conducive to establishing lasting bonds with the Turks. Yet in all of Ibn Fadlan's travels, he did not mention coming across a *khanqah* or even a lone Sufi proselytizing to the Ghuzz. This may have been a matter of his bias. The Sufis did not receive full mainstream acceptance until the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Until then they practiced in private or in small, secretive clans. Their absence from the account indicates a low level of Sufi activity on the frontiers in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Margaret Malamud's study of Sufism in Khurasan during this period is enlightening. In question is the Sufi stronghold of Nishapur in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. She reported that, "before the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Sufism was a marginal phenomenon in Nishapur."<sup>97</sup> If Sufism was a weak force in far eastern Persia, how much less must it have been in the heart of Central Asia and the steppe? Further, her study stated that, "Khurasan was the first settled society encountered by the Turkish Ghaznavid dynasty (established ca. 994-998) and the Seljuqs (by 1040)."<sup>98</sup> She explained that the Sufis of Nishapur grew into a powerful entity after the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, establishing, "their own structures of authority and organization that were independent of the state."<sup>99</sup> As secular authority melted away before the Turkic conquerors, a rival religious authority offered the invaders a structure for governance. This symbiotic

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<sup>97</sup> Margaret Malamud, "Sufi Organizations and Structures of Authority in Medieval Nishapur," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, No. 3 (August 1994): 429.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

relationship between the Sufis and the Turks was, "first worked out in Khurasan and later adopted in Baghdad and the Seljuq successor states."<sup>100</sup> In a sense, the Turks came to the Sufis. This is not to say that Sufi missionaries did not venture into the steppe. The importance of Margaret Malamud's study is to understand that the conversion of the Turks was more complex than any one factor. The trade relationships formed between the merchants of Khwarazm was a prime factor in introducing the Turks to Islam. These caravan riders were not Sufis, but to call them Sunni is perhaps not correct either.

To say Sunni Islam had developed into a codified and universal religion in the 10<sup>th</sup> century would not be accurate. Carter Findley argued that, "The creation of a widely accepted synthesis of Sunni Muslim belief, teaching, and practice was a project of roughly the twelfth to fifteenth centuries."<sup>101</sup> He agreed that the Sufi brotherhoods did not become prominent until that same period as well. Therefore, initial Islamic contact made with the Turks is somewhat eclectic in nature. Indeed, "wandering mystics (dervishes) known for their bizarre garb, or lack thereof, and their unconventional practices" certainly found their way onto the steppe prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>102</sup> Equally if not more important are the thousands upon thousands of merchants with less than zealous motives that spread Islam simply by traveling through the steppe without a thought of conversion. In this sense, "the Muslims who impressed potential converts were as likely to be wild and woolly dervishes as learned ulema."<sup>103</sup> Ibn Fadlan was the latter of the two. His account is concrete evidence of contact and conversion prior to Turkish conquests. These conversions had important consequences. As the Turks migrated into the Near East they brought

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Carter Findley, *Turks in World History*, (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2004) 60.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 61.

about what some historians call a Sunni Restoration. Shiite Islam blossomed in the vacuum left by the Abbasids.

### **Shiite Islam**

The weakness of the Abbasid caliphate was illustrated religiously as well as politically in Ibn Fadlan's account. On the Khurasan Road, in Damghan (northeast Persia), the ambassadors were forced to pose as merchants by the appearance of a powerful Zaydi Shiite.<sup>104</sup> He wrote, "We concealed ourselves in the caravan and hastened on our march as far as Nishapur."<sup>105</sup> This follower of Zaidism was Ibn Qarin, a prince of the Caspian Bawand dynasty.<sup>106</sup> He was a client of al-Hasan b. al-Qasim (d. 928), the governor of Tabaristan.<sup>107</sup> This region was solidly Fiver and violently opposed to the Abbasid caliphate as well as the Samanid Emirate. In 850 CE the caliph al- Mutawakkil (r.847 CE – 861 CE), "ordered the destruction of the tomb of al-Husayn b. Ali at Karbala, explicitly, it appears, to prevent the pious visitation of the tomb which had become an important ritual for Shiite Muslims."<sup>108</sup> Up until that time, Shiites were afforded independence and peaceable coexistence within the majority Sunni population. As the Shiite movement grew, the more it became feared by the mainstream. Until that time, many partnered with the Abbasids. The al-Furat family, as in Ibn al-Furat, had converted to Shi'ism by the end of

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<sup>104</sup> Fivers/Zaydi Shiites are among the earliest sect of Shi'ism. There are called such because they venerate the grandson of Husayn b. Ali, Zayd b. Ali, making him the fifth and final imam in the bloodline of the Prophet, by their reckoning. Shiites believe that earthly authority derives from familial relation to the Prophet and resistance to incorrect Muslim rule.

<sup>105</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 4.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Johnathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003)134.

the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>109</sup> The destruction of the tomb of Husayn marked a violent schism between believers in the early centuries of Islam.

The peoples of Khwarazm returned the Shiites disdain. Ibn Fadlan reported that they cursed the name of Ali at the end of their prayers.<sup>110</sup> The Khurasan frontier was a battleground for the hearts and minds of the faithful. Richard Frye explained that al-Muqtadir was unable to control much of eastern Persia and men such as Ibn Qarin openly preached Shiite conversion in the region.<sup>111</sup> In fact, Damghan was under the control of Shiite "partisans" at the time and Nishapur had recently been "liberated" by a Samanid army from Khurasan.<sup>112</sup> Such language indicates the open armed hostility that existed between Tabaristan and the major Sunni powers. The Abbasids fell to the Shiite Buyids in 945 CE and Egypt broke away as part of the Shiite Fatimids in 969 CE. Ibn Fadlan's account captures the very end of central Islamic rule in Baghdad, before widespread decentralization and the Turkification of Near Eastern states rendered them unrecognizable from the time of the Prophet, before the rise of the Sultanates.

### **Sunni Islam**

Not only was Ibn Fadlan the ambassador to the yiltwar, he was also charged with teaching the Bulgars in the ways of Islam. Initially, this was to be accomplished with the assistance of a cadre of teachers and jurists, but they turned back upon viewing the steppe. Ibn Fadlan was left to complete this task alone.

Ibn Fadlan found that some Bulgars were already practicing Islam. He did not remark that this was a surprise. The messenger that the yiltwar sent may have advised the Abbasids of

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>110</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 8.

<sup>111</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 85.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

this fact. Almish also may have asked for preliminary instruction in the faith from Muslim traders in his dominion. Nothing concerning this can be known with certainty.

The first Islamic practice that Ibn Fadlan corrected was the saying of the *khutba*. He informed Almish that the sermon was not to be said in honor of himself, which it had been, but in honor of Allah. He said to Almish, "The king is God, and from the pulpit none but He, the All-high and All-powerful, should be called king."<sup>113</sup> He further explained that the caliph in Baghdad was satisfied to be called the "slave"<sup>114</sup> of Allah and Almish should do the same. Ibn Fadlan then quoted the Prophet to the yiltwar, teaching him the importance of humility, saying, "Do not address praises to me, as the Christians do to Jesus, son of Mary, for I am only the servant of God and His messenger."<sup>115</sup> This episode served to inform Almish of two basic Islamic tenants. The separation of religious power from secular power was an important lesson for the new converts. Allah was of supreme importance, not the earthly ruler. The yiltwar was nothing more than a servant to Allah. Furthermore, Muhammad was but the vessel through which prophecy flowed and not revered as Allah was revered. This was a foundational belief that separated the Muslims from the Christians and Ibn Fadlan wanted to make sure that correct instruction was given in this matter.

The next point of Islamic law about which Ibn Fadlan gave advice was the *iqama*. Ibn Fadlan wrote, "The king's muezzin repeated the phrases of the *iqama* twice when he gave the call to prayer."<sup>116</sup> Ibn Fadlan informed Almish that, "the Commander of the Faithful only has them said once."<sup>117</sup> Almish then ordered the muezzin to recite the *iqama* in accordance to Ibn Fadlan's

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<sup>113</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 27.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.



wishes. Richard Frye explained that the "double recitation" of the formulaic call to prayer was prescribed by the Hanafi school of Islamic law while the "single recitation" was indicative of the Shafi school and practiced in the court of Baghdad.<sup>118</sup> For some time the muezzin obeyed Ibn Fadlan, until Almish ordered him to revert to his old recitation. At that time, the yiltwar and the ambassador were locked in a fierce debate over the missing funds that had been promised him in order to build a fortress. He used this religious disagreement as an advantage and as a metaphor in argument. Almish said, "I shall accept no admonishments from you in matters of religion until someone comes to me with a sincere tongue."<sup>119</sup> Ibn Fadlan believed he still had the respect of the yiltwar, despite their differences. He earned an ironic nickname from Almish: "He called me Abu Bakr the truthful."<sup>120</sup> While this moniker indicates that Almish believed the embassy had pocketed the dinars meant for his fortress, it also indicates that the ruler held an understanding concerning the roots of the Islamic faith, as Abu Bakr was the first caliph to follow the Prophet.

While Ibn Fadlan failed to convert Turkic headmen, he fulfilled his charge with the common folk among the Bulgars. He wrote:

We saw a kin group among them numbering 5,000 members, counting men and women, and they had all converted to Islam. They were known by the name al-Baranjar. They had built themselves a wooden mosque to pray in, but did not know how to say the prayers. So I taught the whole group how it should be done.<sup>121</sup>

Ibn Fadlan wrote of a personal conversion. He assisted a man named Talut in converting his entire family. They changed their names to reflect their new faith and learned to say a pair of

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<sup>118</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 101.

<sup>119</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 31.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 39.

short prayers in Arabic: "His joy in knowing these two verses was greater than if he had been made king of the Saqaliba."<sup>122</sup>

The new converts faced challenges in saying all of the prescribed prayers during the "white nights."<sup>123</sup> The northerly latitudinal zone of the land of the Bulgars experienced brief nights in the height of summer. Ibn Fadlan observed that, "if a pot is put on the fire at sunset, there is no time for the water to boil before the dawn prayer."<sup>124</sup> He further noted, "I saw that the moon did not reach the middle of the sky, but lingered above the horizon for a while. Then dawn broke and the moon vanished."<sup>125</sup> There were no contingencies built into Islam for such phenomena. The afternoon and evening prayers were said together.

### **Death Rites**

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, enough of an Islamic identity had coalesced that certain rituals surrounding the handling of the dead evolved. These rituals separated an Islamic burial from pagan death rites as well as competing monotheistic ceremonies. Many of the practices surrounding the handling of the dead originated with precedents set by the Prophet. As an instructor of sharia, Ibn Fadlan would have been familiar with a typical urban Islamic funeral. Firstly, a close relative washed the corpse in an act of ritual purification. Then they clothed the body in a burial shroud. The deceased often purchased this garment in advance as an investment in their own funeral. Though renounced by the Prophet, women of the clan mourned and wailed loudly for the dead as they went to their grave. A procession of men carried the body on a wooden bier to the final resting place. Most cemeteries were outside the main gates of Islamic cities in this period. They were along the roads, following the Roman model. Friends and family

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 33.

inserted the body into the grave lying on its right side and facing Mecca. Though the Prophet discouraged the erection of tombstones and grave markers, many Muslims placed them and decorated them in Quranic verse. Both the Abbasids and Samanids erected family mausoleums in their capitals. Once in the grave, popular religious imagination believed that the afterlife in the tomb held all manner of luxuries or torments as one awaited the Day of Judgment.<sup>126</sup>

Apprised of Ibn Fadlan's base knowledge and predilections concerning death rites, one can view his biases more clearly. Indeed, he witnessed the funeral of a Muslim merchant in the encampment of the Volga Bulgars. Concerning ritual corpse washing, he said, "if a woman from Khwarazm is present, then they wash the body after the Muslim fashion..."<sup>127</sup> This indicated that men were unwilling to wash the corpse of their brethren. Fellow Islamic merchants were acceptable as corpse washers in most legal scholar's opinions. After all, it was popularly believed by the *umma* that Ali and Abbas washed the body of the Prophet. The deciding factor in the minds of most of the *ulama* was whether one could have had a legal sexual relationship with the deceased.<sup>128</sup> These other merchants clearly could not have a legal sexual relationship with the deceased and were therefore eligible to care for his body. The status of the woman from Khwarazm is unknown. That a female stranger was more preferable to wash the corpse of an Islamic man than were his male partners says more about human nature than Islam. Where there is a woman willing to be paid to do the unpleasant work of society, there is a man with money who will employ her. Ibn Fadlan described the rest of the funeral as according to the prescribed

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<sup>126</sup> Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Leor Halevi's book *Muhammad's Grave* is a multi-award winning research into the political, legal and social history of death in the early Muslim world. This inadequate, condensed version of his research is an injustice.

<sup>127</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 43.

<sup>128</sup> The *ulama* were the body of religious scholars that offered opinions on Islamic law. There were several schools of Islamic law that offered varying opinions.

Islamic rites. Indeed, he did not comment on the fact that an unfamiliar woman washed the Muslim man's body.

The example of the pagan funeral of a "great man"<sup>129</sup> performed by the Volga Bulgars reversed the traditional role of mourners from an Islamic point of view. Immediately following his description of the Islamic funeral, Ibn Fadlan described the funeral of a pagan among the Volga Bulgars. What were most striking to him were the lamentations of the men. "They stand at the door of his tent and sob, making the most hideous and savage noises. This is how it is done by free men."<sup>130</sup> The practice of wailing for the dead in Arabia pre-dates Islam. One such popular cry of Arab women went, "Oh, the man! Oh, the mountain! Oh, the severance from his household!"<sup>131</sup> Such wailing would have been very familiar to Ibn Fadlan's ears. For free men to show such emotion as opposed to women was truly a remarkable sight. What was even more remarkable was the reaction of the slaves of the deceased. Ibn Fadlan described them as self-flagellating with leather whips in a public display of mourning.<sup>132</sup> He further stated that this period of mourning lasted for two years. This last statement is unverifiable. Ibn Fadlan likely stayed with the Volga Bulgars for a matter of months, not years. Therefore, he was reporting what he was told via an interpreter, not what he had seen. Yet, one can imagine a scenario in which mourners ritually lamented at the home of the deceased for an extended period. The identity of this "great man" is unknown as well. If he was the predecessor of Almish, one wonders how long he had been dead. Perhaps this is where Ibn Fadlan found his duration period for mourning. Much concerning this passage is ultimately unknown and unknowable.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012), 44.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>131</sup> Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) 116.

<sup>132</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 44.

While the so-called Viking funeral near the end of Ibn Fadlan's work is easily the most famous passage, the funeral of the Ghuzz chieftain has escaped the popular imagination as well as the scrutiny of scholars. Yet both are equally as telling of peoples in a distant time and place. The account of the Scandinavian funeral is longer and more detailed. This is because Ibn Fadlan witnessed a single event, whereas the description of the Ghuzz funeral appears to be an amalgamation of oral accounts and observation. Taken together, they reveal that these disparate people had much in common.

The funerals of Ghuzz and Scandinavian headmen have striking similarities. Firstly, their attendants prepared their bodies, dressed them in fine clothing and propped them up in a natural position, surrounding them with their finest possessions.<sup>133</sup> For the Ghuzz chieftain, this meant donning his best tunic and belt, bearing his bow, and holding a cup of *kumis* as the rest of his possessions lay around him.<sup>134</sup> The Scandinavian headman was dressed in full panoply of "trousers, socks, boots, a tunic, and a brocade caftan with gold buttons."<sup>135</sup> To this, his followers added a sable trimmed brocaded cap, his weapons, and placed mead, fruit, basil, bread, meat and onions around him.<sup>136</sup> The Ghuzz covered the grave of their chieftain with a mound of earth, making it in the shape of a dome, like many of the steppe people that preceded them.<sup>137</sup> One can envision the *kurgans* of the Scythians. Ibn Fadlan stated that the Ghuzz then sacrificed the horses of the deceased chieftain. A feast was made of their flesh and a massive display of earthly riches was made of their heads and hooves, which were mounted on stakes around the burial mound.<sup>138</sup> The Scandinavian headman joined death with the sacrifice of a dog, two horses, two cows, and a

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 18 & 51.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

cock and hen.<sup>139</sup> Loyal servants of the Ghuzz chieftain erected wooden effigies numbering those he killed in battle, so the chieftain would have followers in the afterlife.<sup>140</sup>

While those studied in the basics of anthropology understand that both the Ghuzz and the Scandinavian deceased prepared for a journey into the next life, their contemporaries had to be reminded to fulfill all of their obligations to the deceased in regards to this passing. If there was a delay in the preparations for a Ghuzz chieftain's burial, Ibn Fadlan reported that an older man among them would say something of this sort:

I have seen so-and- so – that is, the dead man – in a dream, and he said to me, 'You see, my companions have all gone ahead of me and the soles of my feet are split from my efforts to follow them, but I cannot catch up with them and I have remained alone.'<sup>141</sup>

For peoples that lived and died on horseback, as did the Ghuzz, such a rebuke, such a cry from beyond the grave surely would have required action. Ibn Fadlan recorded that once a diviner delivered such an invocation, the young men carried out the proper slaughter of horses and the elder returned with a dream in which the deceased had received his charges and had joined his companions in death.<sup>142</sup> Ibn Fadlan did not identify the elder as a shaman or person of religious bent but it is reasonable to believe that the dreamer was a shaman of the steppes. Since he was told this story through an interpreter, the identity of the dreamer may have been obscured.

The explanation for the delay in the sacrifice of the horses was purely economic. Ibn Fadlan stated that the Ghuzz sacrificed "even a hundred or two hundred head" at one time.<sup>143</sup> Again, whether he witnessed this or was told this is unknown, but it does seem hyperbolic. The importance of horses to Turkic peoples cannot be overstated. The loss of so many at once would

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

have significant political, economic and military ramifications. Fortunes rose and fell on the steppe based on one tribe's ability to exert hegemony over other tribes. Without the wealth horses provided to keep retainers or military mounts to hold rivals at bay, a chieftain and his family could find themselves enslaved. Indeed, it was a true religious sacrifice to send so many to the grave with the chieftain.

The most beautiful and terrible passage concerning the Scandinavians concerns human sacrifice. The glimpse of the afterlife afforded to the Scandinavians came to a young slave girl, not an elder or a shaman. She had volunteered to enter the next life with her master and as such spent the days leading up to his funeral drinking and cavorting with his closest allies, attended by two girls who saw to her every need.<sup>144</sup> Just before the old woman who performed the rites, called a witch by Ibn Fadlan, took her away, the headman's men raised her up in the air, standing on the palms of their hands.<sup>145</sup> She described Paradise, saying,

There I see my mother and father. There I see all my dead relatives sitting. There I see my master [the deceased] sitting in Paradise and Paradise is green and beautiful. There are men with him and young people, and he is calling me. Take me to him.<sup>146</sup>

The old woman then escorted her to a pavilion that had been set up over the chieftain's resting place in the center of his beached longship. There the slave girl was ritually strangled and stabbed. The ship was then set aflame and burnt to ashes within an hour.<sup>147</sup> The Scandinavian funeral received a full treatment in the film *The 13th Warrior*.

This ceremony was so foreign, so alien, to Ibn Fadlan that he offered no commentary. Historian James Montgomery offers the most compelling argument concerning this passage.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>148</sup> James Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3, (2000): 23-24.

He believes that the Scandinavians that Ibn Fadlan observed could be any number of possible combinations of ethnic groups combined in mutual effort. As such, Montgomery believed the many facets of the ceremony had many origins, even some which were Turkic.

Ibn Fadlan's traders are the mercantile warrior elite who placed themselves firmly at the top of the Slavic social scale, and his picture attests to the fluidity of the process of cultural and racial intermingling, a fluidity which many commentators, with an agenda very decidedly their own, have wished to neglect, curtail or abandon.<sup>149</sup>

Hazarding the riverine routes of Eastern Russia in dragon ships was no small task either. Fighting in and out of often-hostile territory while making a concerted effort to portage a laden longship between rivers required practiced cooperation. Such a para-military and commercial enterprise formed strong bonds between men. Indeed, the name by which the Byzantines called these warrior-traders was Varangians. The word Varangians was a phonetic pronunciation of the compound Norse word that translated roughly as 'sworn companions'. The Scandinavians who traveled to the East during the Viking Age, therefore, developed a distinct culture that included aspects of the Slavic and other indigenous cultures they encountered. Ibn Fadlan captured the practices of a distinctive mix of peoples, an eyewitness account of cultural exchange that was the birth of the Russian people. Therefore, the vision of Paradise and the specifics of the ceremony observed by Ibn Fadlan can in no way be construed as representative of a normal or standard Scandinavian or Viking funeral of the era. His account is an important snapshot of a particular time and place. This is another example of what makes the account of Ibn Fadlan so distinctive.

### **Conclusion**

World historians look for connections: connections between peoples, between places, between eras. Ibn Fadlan's account provides many connections. There are many points from which to expound and elaborate. Yet, in its essence, it is a chronicle bound to a particular place

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 24.



and time. Without connecting the account with what came before or what will come after, a picture of Ibn Fadlan's present is a wonderful thing. Nowhere is this truer than in the study of the religion of his time. Islam was still coalescing, three centuries after the death of the Prophet. Consider the state of Christianity in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, or even the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when it had been an official religion for a time. The Scandinavians, the last wave of the Germanic migration, terrified Europe and beyond with their pagan religion. The Turks, displacers of the Iranian steppe dwellers, brought Tengrism and Altaic religion into contact with the West. Ibn Fadlan traveled the regions where these three belief systems mingled and captured firsthand knowledge of their practice.

## **Chapter Three- Society & Economics**

### **Introduction**

In order to understand Ibn Fadlan's observations concerning society and economics, one must consider his point of view. He considered certain practices taboo based on his religion and his culture. Accordingly, a fleshing out of the man and his companions is necessary to place his ethnography in proper context. Ibn Fadlan was an expert in sharia and a man of letters. His companions were former slaves, slave-soldiers, educators and servants. Each of them had a differing background in the Islamic world. He addressed many facets of the lifestyles he observed. Those that he commented on most often were those that differed most sharply from his own. As such, opportunities to examine his bias are many.

The main societal topics that concerned Ibn Fadlan were hygiene and sexuality. As an urbane Muslim, Ibn Fadlan was accustomed to regular access to bathhouses and to performing the ritual ablutions prescribed by Islam. This did not exist on the steppe. Indeed, the Turks considered bathing a sacrilege. More than describing his own discomfort for lack of cleanliness, he described the hygiene habits of those he met. Ibn Fadlan was concerned about the sexual practices of those he encountered, as he believed that the open sexuality he observed was terribly sinful. The sexual habits of the Scandinavians troubled him most deeply. They incorporated sex into their slave trade as well as their funerals.

Concerning economics, Ibn Fadlan revealed very specific details as to how the northern trade route functioned. In this aspect, the chronicle serves as a distinct testament to the long-range connectivity of civilization in the early Postclassical period. From the banks of the Volga to the bazaars of Baghdad, Ibn Fadlan and his company tramped every step and observed how this route functioned. He also noted how coins functioned in this trade. The farther from the City of Peace he traveled the more debased the coins became, with the exception of the farthest point,

as the Scandinavians would only accept pure silver in return for their long wares. No other primary source, no memoir or court documents, reveals as much about the details of daily life in this time and place as does the chronicle of Ibn Fadlan.

### **The Embassy**

The account of Ibn Fadlan offers almost all the information as to who he was and the nature of his character. There is hardly any evidence concerning him otherwise. The historian Richard Frye has spent decades researching the account and he believes that Ibn Fadlan was the client of Muhammad b. Salayaman, the Abbasid general, and probably acted as his chief scribe.<sup>150</sup> Marius Canard, the French historian and a translator of the account, agreed. He also believed that Ibn Fadlan was not born an Arab, but had taken an Arab name as an official of the court. This is consistent with normative practices of the time. Richard Frye furthered that the name Fadlan derived from the root word *fadl*, meaning, "to excel or surpass."<sup>151</sup> These opinions are consistent with Jonathan Berkey's statement that the Abbasid Caliphate relied more heavily on non-Arab clients than previous rulers of the Islamic state.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, the Abbasids were also more prone to formal diplomacy than their Umayyad predecessors, as well as espionage and other more sophisticated forms of statecraft.<sup>153</sup>

Ibn Fadlan's stated capacity as part of the embassy to the Bulgars was as follows: "to read the message of the Caliph to him [Almish], to hand over what he [the Caliph] had sent as gifts, and to have oversight over those learned in the law and the teachers."<sup>154</sup> This information is

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<sup>150</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 8.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>152</sup> Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 118.

<sup>153</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Diplomacy".

<sup>154</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005), 25.

very basic but also very important. Ibn Fadlan was an experienced scribe and no stranger to the dangers of the road, based on his service to the general. He was trusted to speak publicly with enough polish and *gravitas* to impress a barbarian king. This type of skill only comes with practice and indicates that Ibn Fadlan was a speaker in some capacity. Further, his additional duty as ceremonial gift giver speaks to experience in courtly etiquette. His supervisory role over those sent to teach the Bulgars in the ways of Islam illustrates his proficiency in sharia. An image of Ibn Fadlan as a military attaché, a writer, a fledgling diplomat with a knowledge of religious law is accurate. Yet more information is required to flesh out the details.

In all probability, Ibn Fadlan saw himself as a practitioner of *adab* as well as a member of the *ulama*. These were not mutually exclusive roles or identities. An *adib* desired to be a cosmopolitan man with aristocratic virtues: "high quality of soul, good character, urbanity, courtesy."<sup>155</sup> Men of the same mindset and affluence dined and conversed about poetry and prose, Arabic and Persian literature being the "backbone" of a cultured man's education in the Abbasid period.<sup>156</sup> One may think of *adab* as a synonym for the Roman concept of *urbanitas*.<sup>157</sup>

A kind of culture war between Persian and Arabic identities was at play in Ibn Fadlan's time. The Persian Abbasids pushed back against what they considered the "uncouth" Bedouin traditions they inherited as leaders of an Islamic empire.<sup>158</sup> *Adab* was a way in which the Abbasid ruling class and aristocracy sought to refine and separate themselves from the rustic roots of Islam. A superior diplomat had the sort of skills honed in the late night conclaves of Baghdad. If this is the case, the ethnographic observations of Ibn Fadlan take on a new depth. Not only was he an urbane Muslim, he was from a class of gentlemen that looked for profound

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<sup>155</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Adab"

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

meaning in civilization. This makes his biases against transhumant and non-Islamic peoples even more striking and significant.

There is a tendency to read well-written works of the past and assume the writer must have led a life of pure leisure. This is a common fallacy and one cannot assume such of Ibn Fadlan. The embassy left Baghdad on June 21, 921 CE. They arrived at the camp of the Volga Bulgars on May 14, 922 CE, nearly a year later. The large caravan traversed mountains, frozen steppes and forded almost innumerable rivers. Ibn Fadlan, therefore, was not genteel or waifish. To endure such a journey he would necessarily have been vital and hardy. Perhaps this is not what one has in mind when imagining a writer, a diplomat and teacher of law and religion. His role as a military scribe attests to his ability to move with an army in the field. The nature of travel in the 10<sup>th</sup> century limited the diplomatic corps to those physically capable to make arduous journeys.

Bars the Saqlab and Tikin the Turk were the unsung heroes of the chronicle. Ibn Fadlan and his companions crossed linguistic and cultural zones as they traveled to the Volga Bulgars. Without assistance, they would not have survived. Bars and Tikin provided that assistance. Ibn Fadlan must have relied heavily upon them for translation. Every conversation he recorded with a non-Muslim likely passed through one or the other's lips. Bars the Saqlab was a native of the Volga Bulgars, as Saqlab was the name used by the Abbasids for the Bulgars as well as other Slavic peoples. His name Bars was likely a translation of the Slavic name Boris.<sup>159</sup> Richard Frye believed him to be the official translator of the embassy.<sup>160</sup> Tikin was, of course, a Turk. His

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<sup>159</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 223.

<sup>160</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 83.

name meant "hero" in his native tongue.<sup>161</sup> He likely served as the guide and translator through the steppe lands of the Turks.<sup>162</sup> Guides and translators were of such great importance to Abbasid diplomacy that the caliphs in Baghdad retained them.

As with many words, *ghulam* has multiple meanings based on context. *Ghulam*, essentially, is a synonym for *mamluk*. In the original Arabic text, Ibn Fadlan referred to both Bars and Tikin to as *ghulam*. The most recent translation chose to use this for Bars and Tikin throughout, but also used *ghulam* in other instances where it has other meanings.<sup>163</sup> In one context *ghulam* means a young freedman or servant; a page.<sup>164</sup> This is not exactly the truth for Bars and Tikin. In the context of the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Abbasid court, *ghilman* (plural of *ghulam*) were slave soldiers; *mamluks*. Bars and Tikin were likely possessions of the Abbasid court.

*Ghilman* were often prisoners of war and of Turkic background, such as Tikin. Most came to Baghdad via the slave trade from the Samanid Emirate, who constantly raided unfriendly Turkic confederations.<sup>165</sup> The Samanid hero Ismail is said to have taken as many as 15,000 Turkic slaves in his time and founded schools for their training.<sup>166</sup> *Ghilman* were clients of the caliphs, who used them to insulate themselves from internal rivalry and intrigue. As such, *ghilman* were well equipped, well fed and their loyalty ever a concern for the caliph. Like many of the Persian rulers of the past, the caliph became an isolated figure only seen on ceremonial occasions.<sup>167</sup> High walls, inner gates, gardens and a breastwork of administrative offices sealed

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<sup>161</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 223.

<sup>162</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 83.

<sup>163</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 10.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>165</sup> Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 64.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>167</sup> Johnathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 126.

the inner palace and harem from the noise and chaos of Baghdad.<sup>168</sup> The *ghilman* were the private army of the caliph and ensured his solitude and safety.

*Ghilman* came to play a large role in the eventual downfall of the Abbasid dynasty. Their ranks as well as their egos swelled until they became a powerful independent entity. They became so dangerous that the caliph al-Mu`tasim (r. 833- 842 CE) built a new capital city some eighty miles north of Baghdad on the Tigris River, called Samarra, in order to escape the intrigues of the Turkic *mamluk* commanders. Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r.847- 861 CE) was famously killed by his *mamluk* guards. The reign of al-Mu'tadid (r. 892- 902 CE), the father of al-Muqtadir's predecessor, saw the capital restored to Baghdad. Not only were the treacherous aristocracy fighting against the central authority of the caliph, a powerful and quasi-independent army of foreign soldiers required favors in exchange for loyalty to the Commander of the Faithful in the heart of capital.

Ibn Fadlan did not illustrate the embassy as having had strong leadership, yet he named an official ambassador in the chronicle. The eunuch Nadhir al-Harami chose Sawsan al-Rassi as the envoy from the Caliph. His name meant "lily," a common moniker for male slaves of the time. He was a freedman of the eunuch.<sup>169</sup> As a freedman, Sawsan became a nominally willing servant to his former master and benefited from their patron-client relationship. This arrangement was strikingly similar to the Byzantine court of the same period. Ibn Fadlan did not mention Sawsan again and his duties are unknown. Richard Frye believes that Sawsan was entrusted with carrying confidential correspondence from Nadhir to Almish, and perhaps the

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<sup>168</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 56.

<sup>169</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 223.

medicine Almish had expressly requested.<sup>170</sup> This interpretation would make Sawsan not the official ambassador, but merely the private envoy of Nadhir and perhaps even one studied in pharmacy.

The size and makeup of the rest of the embassy has been difficult to estimate. Teachers and jurists are listed, but in no fixed quantity. Almost certainly, the ambassadors employed a small bodyguard force. Pack animals and handlers were necessary to carry the gifts as well as supplies for the journey. Servants of all type were necessary for such a venture. Without putting too fine a point on it, one could safely assume that dozens of men made up the embassy. That group then joined up with caravans traveling in the same direction for safety. Indeed, Ibn Fadlan recorded just that to avoid Shiite heretics in Damaghan.<sup>171</sup> On the Western Steppe, Ibn Fadlan gave a glimpse of the size of the caravan the group was traveling with at that time: "some 3,000 horses and 5,000 men."<sup>172</sup> He listed no camels, but mentioned them throughout the chronicle. Bactrian camels were a mainstay on Central Asian trade routes.

The embassy was an eclectic group. Ibn Fadlan was versed in sharia, a scribe, and a diplomat. The guides were likely slave soldiers to the Abbasid court. The personal servant of the eunuch that organized the embassy was a former slave that enjoyed the favor of his powerful patron. Some number of teachers and jurists as well as pages, servants, animal handlers and bodyguards accompanied them as well. All of these came from the center of the Islamic world. They were accustomed to a lifestyle and set of social traditions that were among the most developed and advanced that the world had known. Ibn Fadlan left the culture and incredibly high standard of living of Baghdad and entered a different world.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler From Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 2005) 83.

<sup>171</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012), 4.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



## Hygiene

Ibn Fadlan followed the rules of ritual ablution required of Islam. In the month he spent in Bukhara, he surely spent time in their famous baths. Indeed, he recorded bathing in Khwarazm.<sup>173</sup> That the shah continually stoked the warm baths in winter, on the very edge of the Islamic world, is a testament to the civilizing nature of Islam and the power of that far-flung kingdom. Ibn Fadlan wrote that it was so cold in Khwarazm that, after his bath, his beard froze on the way back to his lodgings: "It was a block of ice, which I had to thaw in front of the fire."<sup>174</sup> He also recorded that Muslims could not wash in front of the Ghuzz, as the Turks felt this was a form of sorcery.<sup>175</sup> They had to wait until night to perform their ablution. From the beginning to the end of his journey, Ibn Fadlan maintained the Islamic ritual practice of cleaning as well as he could. Therefore, one must keep in mind that the observations he made concerning the hygiene of others not only come from someone from a different culture but of a disciplined hygienic mindset.

Both the Ghuzz and the Scandinavians earned rebukes from Ibn Fadlan for their lack of cleanliness and personal hygiene. Of the Ghuzz, he said they do not clean themselves after urination, defecation or sexual intercourse.<sup>176</sup> He said the same of the Scandinavians.<sup>177</sup> Ritual ablutions were required of Muslims after such acts. Likewise, he compared both peoples to "wandering asses."<sup>178</sup> This was his way of calling them uncivilized, like a wild donkey in the wilderness. This allusion comes from Ibn Fadlan's study of sacred verse. For example, the Quran used the ass as a symbol of ignorance:

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>176</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 12.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 12 & 46.

The likeness of those who are entrusted with the Law of Moses, yet apply it not, is as the likeness of the ass carrying books. Wretched is the likeness of folk who deny the revelations of Allah. And Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk.<sup>179</sup>

The prophets of the Hebrew Bible also used the wild ass as a symbol for ignorance and lack of civilization: "Behold, as wild asses in the desert, go they forth to their work; rising betimes for a prey: the wilderness yieldeth food for them and for their children."<sup>180</sup> In this context, the comparison of the Ghuzz and the Scandinavians to wandering beasts could also be an allusion to transhumant lifestyle. In Ibn Fadlan's view, not only were they filthy, they did not know well enough to settle and live a civilized life and to worship Allah. For the chronicler to use such language reveals his bias against the lifestyle of those he encountered.

Ibn Fadlan found one hygienic practice of the Ghuzz particularly noteworthy. Upon receiving the diplomatic gift of a "robe of honour,"<sup>181</sup> the Turkic headman Atrak stood and removed the brocaded caftan<sup>182</sup> he was wearing to put on his new silk garment. Ibn Fadlan noted that the clothing worn next to his skin was, "so filthy that it was in rags, for it is their custom never to take off a piece of clothing they are wearing until it falls to pieces."<sup>183</sup> He later recorded meeting a Bashkir, whom he called the dirtiest of the Turkic peoples, which picked the lice and fleas from his coat and ate them.<sup>184</sup> While these things revolted Ibn Fadlan, it appears there were traditional reasons for the Turkic aversion to bathing and washing clothes. Most likely, it was the

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<sup>179</sup> Sura 62:5.

<sup>180</sup> Job 24:5.

<sup>181</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 20.

<sup>182</sup> The artifacts labeled "Man's Caftan and Leggings from the North Caucasus of the Eighth to Tenth Century" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of Near Eastern Art are a prime example of this sort of native costume. Composed of linen and silk, matching brocade runs along the hems of the caftan as well as the upper portion of the leggings.

<sup>183</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 20.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

nature of nomadic life. Each person had to carry water between known rivers or oases. As such, water was not to be wasted.

As the translators and editors of the most recent translation pointed out, other historians have observed the same concerning steppe peoples since ancient times. For example, Herodotus (d.c. 420 BCE) recorded that the Scythians would not wash in water, but enjoyed rubbing fragrant balms into their skin and communal smoke baths.<sup>185</sup> Of the Huns, Ammianus Marcellinus (d.c. 391 CE) wrote, "Once they have put their neck into some dingy shirt they never take it off or change it till it rots off and falls to pieces from incessant wear."<sup>186</sup> This places Ibn Fadlan as part of a tradition of historians that have had first-hand contact with steppe peoples and recorded their history and habits.

Ibn Fadlan found the Scandinavians to be a paradox. On the one hand, they were beautiful: "I have never seen bodies more perfect than theirs. They were [tall] like palm trees. They are fair and ruddy."<sup>187</sup> On the other hand, they were unclean in the view of Ibn Fadlan, as previously mentioned. To illustrate this, Ibn Fadlan recorded their morning ablution habits. He stated that every morning a young woman brought a large washing basin to the headman of each encampment, along with breakfast. Ibn Fadlan wrote:

He washes and disentangles his hair, using a comb, there in the basin, then he blows his nose and spits and does every filthy thing imaginable in the water. She goes on passing the basin round from one to another until she has taken it to all the men in the house in turn. And each of them blows his nose and spits and washes his face and hair in the basin.<sup>188</sup>

This passage is hyperbolic. The sharing of a washbasin would have seemed impure to Ibn Fadlan. Yet the image he painted waxes absurd, as it did in the scene this vignette inspired in

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<sup>185</sup> Herodotus IV.75

<sup>186</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus XXXI.2

<sup>187</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 45.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

the film *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*. The notion that men would openly spit and blow their nose into a vessel and then offer it to another to wash his face and hands is ludicrous. More likely is the notion that Ibn Fadlan detested the idea of men washing in water used by another. The level of contamination in that water was a construct of Ibn Fadlan's imagination and is another illustration of his bias.

### **Sexuality**

Ibn Fadlan described the Scandinavians as possessing a crude and beastly attitude toward sex. He observed what amounted to orgies attended by the Scandinavians and their slave girls, who he called beautiful.<sup>189</sup> He furthered, "If a merchant enters at this moment [of the orgy] to buy a young slave girl from one of the men and finds him having sex with her, the man [owner] does not get up off of her until he has satisfied himself."<sup>190</sup> Ibn Fadlan went on to report that the sacrificial victim in the headman's funeral had ritual sex with six of his retainers on the deck of the very ship she soon would burn.<sup>191</sup> This mix of ritual sex and communal sex paints the Scandinavians as so overtly sexual that they rarely hide the act from one another. Yet Ibn Fadlan described only slave girls as used in this way. He described the Scandinavians wives as decorated in beautiful jewelry for which the men paid dearly.<sup>192</sup> Ibn Fadlan did not report any sexual relations between the Scandinavian men and their wives in his account: illicit, communal or otherwise. The rampant sex, then, is a byproduct of the Scandinavians' greatest item of trade: human flesh. As property, the slave girls had no right to refuse their master's advances. In this light, the sex was not a consensual exchange of pleasure between adults. Though there is sufficient room for gradation in this view based on the personal predilections of each person

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 46.

involved, the overall view must be one of the realities of 10<sup>th</sup>-century life. The Scandinavians, among myriad other groups, sold others into slavery and used them as they would, regardless of the slave's wishes.

Ibn Fadlan inquired into the matter of adultery among the societies he encountered. He did not mention any disdain on the part of the Scandinavians wives at their husbands activities. Indeed, concubines were legal in the eyes of Islam, but prostituting them or the flesh peddling he witnessed was not.<sup>193</sup> The Bulgars told him the penalty for adultery was that the offender was staked to the ground and split with an axe.<sup>194</sup> Even though he tried to end the practice of mixed nude bathing among the Bulgars, he had to admit, "Under no circumstances do they fornicate."<sup>195</sup> The Ghuzz described a gruesome ceremony in which adulterers were ripped in two by the tension of bent trees.<sup>196</sup> To Ibn Fadlan, these measures would have seemed extreme and barbaric. As a man learned in sharia, he knew what the Prophet had revealed in the Quran as well as the law as understood by the *ulama*. The Prophet defined adultery as sex between a man and a woman who were not married or connected properly as a man and concubine.<sup>197</sup> The punishment the Prophet prescribed for women was detainment in her original family home.<sup>198</sup> Men were to receive one hundred lashes and there were to be multiple witnesses to the offense for any punishment to apply.<sup>199</sup> In the centuries following the death of the Prophet, the many schools of law came to a consensus that defied the word of the Prophet. Stoning, a remnant from the pre-Islamic past, became the punishment for male and female offenders.<sup>200</sup> As a caveat, for one to be

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<sup>193</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Zina"

<sup>194</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012), 38.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>197</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Zina"

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

convicted of adultery, one had to be of adult age, a free person, a Muslim and married.<sup>201</sup> Therefore, while the punishment for adultery in the Islamic world increased to the death penalty, those eligible to receive the penalty was reduced to practicing Muslims with maturity, obligations to another, and possession of free will.

One of the most revealing statements made by Ibn Fadlan is rather innocuous at first blush. Of the Ghuzz, he wrote, "They consider pederasty a terrible thing."<sup>202</sup> He went on to describe how a Muslim trader seduced a "beardless youth," the son of his Turkic host on the steppe.<sup>203</sup> The boy's father caught the trader in flagrante delicto and appealed to the headman of that particular Turkic tribe for justice. The chieftain asked the father if he wanted "a just or an unjust judgment?"<sup>204</sup> The father answered that he wanted a just judgment. The headman decided, "The merchant and your son must be put to death together."<sup>205</sup> Not willing to lose his son, the father allowed the Muslim trader to ransom himself by giving hundreds of sheep to both the father and the chieftain.<sup>206</sup>

To Ibn Fadlan, sodomy with an adolescent boy was not shocking. While the Quran expressly forbade homosexuality, the reality of life in the Abbasid court of the 10<sup>th</sup> century was far different from the 7<sup>th</sup>-century deserts of Arabia. When the Abbasid army overthrew the Umayyad dynasty, they brought with them Persian tastes and traditions developed over centuries of ruling empires.<sup>207</sup> Among those traditions was pederasty. Some Abbasid courtiers with an affinity for adolescents believed the early Islamic prohibition on pederasty and homosexuality

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 16.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Liwat"

was a rustic Bedouin notion, a barbaric and unrefined view of human sexuality.<sup>208</sup> This act was related to *adab* and the culture war between Arab and Persian courtly practices. While never a societal norm, homosexuality and pederasty were tolerated by the *umma* at large, especially among the social elite.<sup>209</sup> Pederasty was a lesser sin; shameful, but not wholly forbidden by the *ulama*. Powerful men enjoyed relationships with their male cupbearers and sexual relationships flourished between masters and students, much as these relationships had carried on in the West during the Classical period.<sup>210</sup> Poets wrote erotic odes concerning the beauty of boys well beyond the time of Ibn Fadlan. The practice became so widespread that some Hanbali scholars issued *fatwas* forbidding men to walk in public with adolescent boys, as with women.<sup>211</sup>

### Trade

The merchants of the northern trade route had to avoid sexual taboos and other cultural misunderstandings if they were to maintain the guest friendship of the Ghuzz. Establishing this friendship was as simple as asking for the hospitality of a Ghuzz who had sufficient wealth to support the needs of the Muslim trader in question.<sup>212</sup> Such hospitality was vital in keeping the caravan routes flowing to the land of the Volga Bulgars. It was as important in the Postclassical period as *xenia* was in the Classical period. Ibn Fadlan wrote: "No Muslim can cross their country without having made friends with one of them, with whom he stays and to whom he brings gifts from the land of Islam—a robe, a veil for his wife, pepper, millet, raisins and walnuts."<sup>213</sup> For these gifts, the Muslim trader received fresh meat, shelter, new mounts and the

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 14 & 15.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 14.

opportunity to borrow money from his host.<sup>214</sup> On the return trip from the Volga Bulgars, the guest-friends exchanged mounts once more and any borrowed monies were repaid to the host.<sup>215</sup> If a merchant died on the return journey, the Turkic host took from the wealthiest trader that traveled with his guest-friend: "He was your cousin, and you are the most appropriate person to pay his debts."<sup>216</sup> In the case of a merchant avoiding his guest-friend and backing out on his obligations, Ibn Fadlan wrote that the Ghuzz would take from his wealthiest companion, as if he had died.

Some Ghuzz would visit their guest-friends in Khwarazm, but their hosts had to be careful to see to their safety in the unfamiliar urban centers of Central Asia. Ibn Fadlan wrote, "If the Turk dies in the house of his friend the Muslim and that man [the Muslim host] happens to be in a caravan going through Turkish territory, the Turks will kill him, saying, 'You killed him [his Turkic guest] by holding him prisoner. If you hadn't shut him up, he wouldn't have died.'" <sup>217</sup> The relationships Ibn Fadlan described outlived his time. They gave rise to the Turkic saying, "a Turk is never without a Persian [settled Muslim] just as a cap is never without a head."<sup>218</sup>

The relationship between the merchants that traveled the steppe and the Ghuzz was strikingly similar to the relationship of the ambassadors to the Ghuzz chieftains. Each trader or group of traders in the caravans had to establish quasi-diplomatic relations with a host in order to maintain their lucrative trade arrangements. Merchants and their guest-friends used the same items utilized by the Abbasid emissaries as gifts for headmen. The northern trade route of the 10<sup>th</sup> century symbolizes the risk-reward venture and the importance of partners as well as outside allies in mitigating the risk of commercial enterprise.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 18.



The reason for all of the risk and arduous travel was the potential for the profits made from bringing luxury items back from the lands of the north. Ibn Fadlan wrote of the bazaar set up by the Bulgars on the banks of the Volga: "On this river is the site of a great market which is held frequently and where all kinds of precious merchandise is to be had."<sup>219</sup> As the Bulgars were located north of the steppe and along the forest band, they had access to the goods of the Russian woods. Ibn Fadlan recorded that they hunted wild honey as well as sables and wild foxes.<sup>220</sup> An Arab geographer, writing circa 985 CE, listed the following as goods flowing into Khwarazm from the north:

Sable, squirrel, ermine, weasel, marten, fox and beaver hides, rabbit skins of various colors, goat skins, wax, arrows, hats, fish glue, fish teeth, castor, amber, honey, hazelnuts, falcons, swords, armor, birchwood, slaves, sheep and cattle.<sup>221</sup>

Not only did the Bulgars trade these goods to the Muslims, Ibn Fadlan claimed that they paid their tribute to the Khazars in sable furs.<sup>222</sup> As for the Scandinavians, Ibn Fadlan did not give an exhaustive list of the goods they brought for trade, but he mentioned sable skins and slaves.<sup>223</sup>

Ibn Fadlan's silence concerning the coinage accepted by the Scandinavians is a gap in the account that is difficult to reconcile. This is because he spoke so much about the coinage of other peoples. Ibn Fadlan recorded that the people of Bukhara had minted what amounted to a penny: an amalgam of copper, brass and bronze worth one one-hundredth of a silver dirham.<sup>224</sup> He also noted that the dirhams minted in Khwarazm were debased with lead or bronze.<sup>225</sup> What he said

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<sup>219</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 40.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>221</sup> Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 50.

<sup>222</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, (New York: Penguin, 2012) 44.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

of the Scandinavian traders is that when one had earned ten thousand dirhams, he had a torque made for his wife.<sup>226</sup> For every subsequent ten thousand dirhams he made, the trader had an additional torque produced.<sup>227</sup> This is an interesting story concerning the display of wealth among the northern traders, but there was a greater theme at play.

Ibn Fadlan missed an important point by not inquiring into or reporting the nature of the coinage in use at the market on the Volga. The Scandinavians prized Islamic silver dirhams for their purity. Coins were specie in the northlands: "So far as one can judge the silver dirhams of the Samanids were used as coinage from the Volga region eastwards, but they only served as bullion, and sometimes as amulets, in regions further to the west."<sup>228</sup> There is evidence for this in Ibn Fadlan's account: as mentioned, the Ghuzz loaned their guest-friends money. Therefore, the Ghuzz used the same Islamic currency as the Muslim traders. The same is not true once the dirhams entered the hands of the Scandinavians. From Poland to England, Islamic coins entered Western Europe via the Scandinavians and their use of riverine routes and the sea-lanes.<sup>229</sup>

Gift giving was the basis of Scandinavian warlord society. Valuable objects were necessary for warlords with a dearth of land to offer in exchange for loyalty. Scandinavian jewelers remolded the Islamic coins into thick bracelets, neck rings and brooches or decorated weapons with silver wire and inlays. These ornamental items were often cut into pieces when the bearer needed to hastily liquidate. These shards of silver were known as hacksilver.<sup>230</sup> Many of the Islamic dirhams were recast as Scandinavian coins. The transfer of treasure from the Near East to Northern Europe and points beyond in this period is difficult to estimate considering the

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Michael Mitchiner, "Evidence for Viking-Islamic Trade Provided by Samanid Silver Coinage," *East and West* 37, No. ¼ (December 1987): 140.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> William Fitzhugh and Elisabeth Ward, eds., *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000) 84.

area of activity of the Scandinavians. Suffice to say, more than gold and precious stones, silver was what the Scandinavians desired.

The lack of precious metals in their homeland is what brought the Scandinavians to the market on the Volga. The Arabs sought luxury items and used coins to purchase them; the coins were the commodity the Scandinavians desired.<sup>231</sup> It was no easy trip:

Northern Russia at this time was covered by dense forests in which there were numerous bogs and marshes. These forests and swamps were home to a large assortment of insects, beasts, and reptiles. These regions could be traversed by rivers but even then there were a variety of obstacles. Rapids existed on the Volchov to threaten ships while portages required that boats be hauled through virgin forests full of predators. The lands of northwestern Russia did not exactly play the role of Circe luring the Vikings into Russia.<sup>232</sup>

A mixed group, the native Scandinavian contingent of the traders was from the region of modern day Sweden. This is attested by the vast majority of surviving Islamic coins found in and around the early Postclassical seat of power on the island of Gotland.<sup>233</sup> Those Scandinavians from the Jutland peninsula region, the Danes, controlled trade moving east and west through the Baltic. Goods coming from the east ended up in the hands of Danish intermediaries before heading west to the markets of Frankia and the British Isles. Cut off from direct access to the fertile West, the Scandinavians of Swedish origin hazarded the Russian frontier. In the East, they had no competition from their Scandinavian rivals.

### Conclusion

Ibn Fadlan gave the minute details of long-range contact. Societies of different life ways worked together for mutual benefit. Those that rode the sea-lanes came together with nomadic pastoralists who in turn made guest-friendship pacts with the peoples from the great powers of

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Thomas Noonan, "Why the Vikings First Came to Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, Bd. 34, H. 3 (1986): 322.

<sup>233</sup> Michael Mitchiner, "Evidence for Viking-Islamic Trade Provided by Samanid Silver Coinage," *East and West* 37, No. ¼ (December 1987): 139.

the Near East. Intimate, human relationships joined widely disparate societies over thousands of miles of mountains, deserts, steppes, rivers and sea. Men of different races and creeds came together in economic enterprise. Despite significant cultural differences, they made commercial alliances. In pacts of friendship and compromise, they ensured one another's prosperity. They placed trust in one another. Men traveling through hostile lands on camels and horses, sleeping in borrowed tents and fording dangerous rivers connected northern Europe to Baghdad. It was a social venture, a living breathing thing: organic, tactile, and vibrant. Ibn Fadlan's firsthand account details exactly how this was accomplished and as such is an important and distinctive world historical document.

## Conclusion

Ibn Fadlan was a minor figure in his own time and he is an underused source today. Yet the wealth of insight his observations afford is almost immeasurable. His 10<sup>th</sup>-century travel account is much more than one of many of Arab travel accounts characteristic of the robust *rihla* genre. Neither is it merely one of several interesting and important world travel accounts of the Postclassical period. These collections have their place. Those with a passing interest find entertainment in the fish-out-of-water observations made by world travelers. Yet each of the accounts in such collections deserves serious inquiry for real historical understanding. Otherwise, one may simply assume that all of the chronicles contained therein are similar in value. Ibn Fadlan's account is of immense and distinct value. His account captured the practices and beliefs of a time on the verge of far-reaching political, religious, and social change.

The centuries old Abbasid dynasty fell soon after Ibn Fadlan's return. The Samanids enjoyed a century of prosperity before their demise. The Turks supplanted both, finally exerting their military might in a semi-united fashion. These Turks remained in the settled areas of the Near East and completed their conversion to Islam. They evolved into the Seljuk state, and then the Ottoman Empire, and they remain as the modern polity of Turkey. The forerunner to the modern Russian state, an amalgam of Slavs and Scandinavian Swedes, formed in the Ukraine and Staraja Ladoga in this same period. They began conversion to Christianity under Vladimir the Great (r. 980- 1015 CE) in 989 CE. Ibn Fadlan gave first hand observations of these declining and forming polities in his era.

To place these events in a Western context, Alfred the Great of Wessex (d. 899 CE) had recently died and the Saxons were locked in decade's long struggle for the Midlands region of England with the Scandinavian Danes. Charles the Simple (d. 929 CE) ruled Frankia and vassal

territories that made up much of Europe. He famously ceded Normandy to Rollo (d.c. 931 CE) and his Viking band in 911 CE. Just as the Near East was on the cusp of change, so was the West. The monumental year of 1066 CE finally decided whether England was Scandinavian or Continental. The edict of Pope Urban II (d. 1099 CE) in 1095 CE set the West and the Islamic world on a collision course. The Normans that fared so well in 1066 CE were set to face the Seljuks that took Baghdad in 1055 CE and then rolled over the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071 CE. The world was changing. Ibn Fadlan captured a final glimpse of a distinctive time and place where contact with Northern and Western Europeans was accomplished via dragon ships, horse lords and merchant camel caravans.

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