

Dissertation for the degree of
Philosophiae doctor (PhD)

The Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity

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In the memory of my parents, Jón and Karólína, and my brother Samúel

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Needless to say, all errors in here are mine.

Reykjavik, February 2013
Thorir Jonsson Hraundal

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A Note on Spelling

This work contains words and references to works written in Arabic, Persian, Old Slavonic, Old Norse, Russian, and more. The principle has been followed throughout to make the text easy on the eye with a minimum of diacritics. For the Arabic, the language most referred to, this has the disadvantage that long vowels and some of the consonants are not distinctly rendered. For those seeking more linguistic information behind the forms appearing here, this can be obtained in many of the editions and translations cited and also in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (see bibliography for details).

‘Turkic’ refers to one of the branches of the Altaic peoples, to which also belong the Mongols. It comprises all the Turkic speaking peoples, also the Turks of Turkey. ‘Turkish’, however, only refers to the latter.

The medieval emporium on the banks of the river Volga, near modern day Kazan in Tatarstan, and its predominantly Turkic inhabitants, were referred to in the Arabic sources as *Al-Bulghar*. In modern usage, it is customary to call the people Volga Bulgars, and their habitat either Bulghar (on the Volga) or Volga Bulgharia, and should not be confused with the Slavonic Balkan Bulgaria through which runs the Danube.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Sources, Perspectives, and Theoretical Approaches

In the course of the ninth and tenth centuries a new entity emerged in the part of Eastern Europe where today we find Ukraine, Belarus and parts of Russia.¹ Byzantine, Latin and Arabic written sources from this time and onwards mention the existence of a group or groups of people in this region alternatively called *Rhos*, *Ruzzij*, or *ar-Rus*. The surviving accounts are nearly as varied as they are numerous, and the identification of the people referred to with this term and the earliest developments associated with them have been a bone of contention for at least two and a half centuries. In simplified terms, the debate has stood especially between Eastern European scholars interpreting the history the Rus primarily as a history of a Slavic people, and Western or Scandinavian scholars who have emphasised the role of a Scandinavian element.²

¹ The tedium of toponymic inconsistency is not only a pre-modern phenomenon. Even today, Eastern Europe means different things for different people. It is preferred here, however, over the more neutral yet less familiar ‘western part of Inner Eurasia’. Eastern Europe in the following comprises European Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, with a particular focus on the tracts between the Baltic and the Caspian sea.

² This debate, sometimes referred to as the Normannist controversy, has been long-lived and lively and the exponents are too numerous to mention all. While some agreement has been reached on several issues, such as a broader view of their ethnic composition, many problems still keep the dialogue very much alive and will probably for years to come (recently, for instance, O. P. Tolochko, ‘The *Primary Chronicle*’s ‘Ethnography’ Revisited: Slavs and Varangians in the Middle Dniepr Region and the Origin of the Rus’ State’, in *Franks, Northmen and Slavs: Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by Ildar H. Garipzanov, Patrick J. Geary and Przemysław Urbańczyk (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), pp. 169–88 (pp. 184–87). Useful overviews of many of the issues of debate are also found in K. Rahbek Schmidt, ‘The Varangian Problem: A Brief History of the Controversy’, in *Varangian Problems*, Scando-Slavica Supplementum I (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1970), pp. 7–20, and O. Pritsak’s introduction to his *The Origins of Rus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 3–7.

For the most part modern historical works on the Rus have followed the narrative laid out in the so-called *Primary Chronicle* compiled in Kiev in the beginning of the twelfth century. Its dominance in Rus studies arises from the fact that it is the only source available that relates in detail and, no less importantly, in a Slavonic language, the beginnings of early Kievan Rus history. Numerous attempts at broadening the field with the inclusion of additional evidence, such as sources written in neighbouring regions as well as discoveries in the fields of archaeology and numismatics, have also significantly added to the historiography of the period.

Summarizing very briefly, the sequence of events is that Northmen known by the name Rus began to infiltrate the Baltic and beyond south- and eastwards in ever-larger numbers in the course of the ninth century. This migration, mainly spurred on by wealth-seeking, resulted in contacts, intermingling, and ultimately union with what is thought to be a predominantly Slavic population. After the establishment of important centres on a roughly north-south axis from Lake Ladoga to the Dniepr, and some considerable conflict, both internecine and directed against Byzantium and steppe peoples, Kiev emerges in the tenth century as the centre of the Rus polity. Prince Vladimir's official adoption of Christianity in 988 emerges as the defining moment which confirms the ties between Kiev and Constantinople and the rest of eastern orthodox Christianity.

The historicity of the *Primary Chronicle's* narrative for most of the early phase of Rus history up to the mid-tenth century, however, is problematic in several important aspects. Firstly, the text was compiled much later than the period in question, in a rather different context and is foremost a literary expression of the civilization and the political system prevailing in Kiev at the time of its composition. Secondly, instead of being a homogenous work authored by one person, the Chronicle is a compilation of several texts of varying antiquity. It has been shown, for instance, that for the period up until the mid-tenth century the text relies heavily on Byzantine texts, including biblical models, which are possibly overlaid with legendary accounts or traditions that survived from this period.³ A

³ *The Russian Primary Chronicle, Laurentian Text*, transl. and ed. by S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1953), pp. 23–35; and O. P. Tolochko, "The Primary Chronicle's 'Ethnography'", p. 178.

notable exception, however, are several treaties concluded between Rus and Byzantium in the course of the tenth century (*s.a.* 911, 945 and 971), that are considered to be authentic documents which were inserted into the text of the chronicle.⁴ A more or less continuous annalistic tradition, culminating in the compilation of the *Primary Chronicle* and other related texts, is generally thought to have begun no earlier than in the early decades of the eleventh century.⁵

The chronicle, compiled in Old East Slavonic, served among other things to write the Rus lands and its people into the Christian universal history, for example by placing the Slavs as one of the peoples included in the lot of Japhet following the flood⁶ and, moreover, to underscore the political primacy of Kiev.⁷ Some of the information in the *Primary Chronicle* is corroborated in other source material, such as the adoption of Christianity which is also attested in Byzantine writings. This also applies to the names which the chronicle attributes to the Slavonic tribes, of which some can be found both in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Administrando Imperio* from the tenth century as well as the anonymous work attributed to the so-called 'Bavarian Geographer' (believed to have been composed in the ninth century).⁸ In some instances such external sources provide illuminating political and prosopographical information, like in the case of mid-tenth century diplomatic relations between princess Olga of Kiev, grandmother to Vladimir, and the courts of both Otto I and the Byzantine emperor. Latin and especially Byzantine sources thus offer several valuable contemporary passages on the early Rus, albeit somewhat limited in their scope. Even the growing importance of trade between the Rus and Constantinople is so scantily documented in Byzantine sources that were it not for the Russo-Byzantine treaties incorporated into the

⁴ *The Primary Chronicle*, p. 26. Recently, D. Ostrowski, 'Pagan Past and Christian Identity in the *Primary Chronicle*', in *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200)*, ed. by I. Garipzanov (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 229–53 (pp. 238–40).

⁵ Three preceding compilations have been identified: the 'Ancient Compilation' from the 1030s, the 'Nikon Compilation' from the 1070s and the 'Initial Compilation' of the 1090s (O. Tolochko, 'Christian Chronology, Universal History, and the Origin of Chronicle Writing in Rus', in *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery*, pp. 205–27 (p. 206)). Tolochko, however, goes on to question this traditional view, originally established by A. Shakhmatov.

⁶ O. Tolochko, 'Christian Chronology, Universal History', p. 51.

⁷ See O. P. Tolochko, 'The *Primary Chronicle*'s 'Ethnography'', p. 177; also S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), pp. 5–7.

⁸ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. Gy. Moravcsik and transl. by R. J. H. Jenkins (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967), p. 63. Wolfgang H. Fritze, 'Geographus Bavarus', in *Lexicon des Mittelalters*, ed. in chief B. Mariacher, vol. 4 (München and Zürich: Artemis, 1989), p. 1270.

narrative of the *Primary Chronicle*, we would have very little evidence for this important development.⁹ Finally, Old Norse written sources composed in and after the thirteenth century contain several references to the Baltic regions and Eastern Europe. These sources are problematic, however, not least due their distance from the lands and the peoples they describe, as well as their late composition. In the following, limited consideration will thus be given to the Old Norse written material, although we shall attend to some of the evidence it contains later in this chapter in our discussion of toponyms, and in the final chapter where we address a few possible loanwords.

The most voluminous contemporary documentation of the early Rus, however, is relayed to us by Muslim geographers and historians writing in the ninth and especially the first half of the tenth century. These writers provide us with a significantly different version of Rus, reporting them not only in a different geography to that of the *Primary Chronicle*, but also as having different social structures and roles in the relationship with their neighbours. Importantly too, these Rus seem to have no ambition either to found a state or to become Christian, two subjects that have especially occupied scholars of early Rus history. Yet, despite constituting the most extensive contemporary material on the Rus in the ninth and tenth centuries the Arabic sources have received relatively limited scholarly attention. Where they have been employed, the alternative narrative they contain has rarely been addressed independently. Moreover, it has sometimes been appended, where possible, to the *Primary Chronicle*'s version of things, or even to supplement the patchy information we have on Old Norse beliefs and rituals.

At the outset, the merging of such very different strands of data requires, in principle, much caution considering the vastly different context of composition and traditions from which they spring. It is problematic, for example, to conflate the Arabic sources with the evidence of the *Primary Chronicle*. The former, written more or less contemporarily with the peoples and events they describe, emerged from a specific cultural and ideological context that was closely knit with the

⁹ J. Shepard, 'Mists and Portals: The Black Sea's North Coast', in *Byzantine Trade 4th–12th Centuries*, ed. by M. M. Mango (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 421–41 (p. 422).

development of Islamic science and scholarship accompanying the expansion of the Caliphate and heavily influenced by Byzantine traditions. In fact it is rarely possible to demonstrate an undisputable convergence between the Arabic sources on the Rus and accounts of them in the Slavonic, Byzantine and Latin material. What is proposed here is to examine the Arabic accounts of the Rus in their own right, with regard to the context of their composition and their internal relationship where it exists, and not its potential to support or detract from passages in the narrative of the *Primary Chronicle*. This approach is in no way intended as a rebuttal of the traditional historiography on the Rus, but rather to offer an alternative perspective on a part of the early period of their history.

1.1 Outline of the Source Material

The Arabic geographical and historical works are an important window to the place and time in which the early Rus are documented, Eastern Europe in the ninth and the tenth centuries. Arguably, the greatest value of this material lies in the fact that it often appears to be contemporaneous, or nearly so, with the Rus it describes (this will be clarified in further detail in chapter two). These reports, on the other hand, are often greatly limited in scope and problematic to interpret because the Arabic writers were generally not very interested in the non-Muslim lands and, moreover, their accounts are sometimes affected by prejudgments that coloured their vision of distant peoples and their lands. An advantageous corollary of this situation, however, is that peoples that are marginal to their worldview, such as the Rus, had little direct impact on the immediate social circumstances of our authors. In turn, the same authors had little reason to distort their accounts in a way that might be ascribed to politically or otherwise influenced bias. That said, the appearance of the Rus in the Arabic sources coincides with a period when the Islamic Caliphate was still in an expansionary phase and thus the keeping record of postal routes and trading activities was an important administrative task.¹⁰ Negotiating the obstacles created by the nature

¹⁰ See, for instance, Adam Silverstein's *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 90–140 and 191–92.

of this material it remains clear, as we shall see in more detail in chapter two, that it conveys important information about the Rus, in particular for the first half of the tenth century. Altogether we can discern over thirty passages dealing, in one way or another, with the Rus at greatly varying length, from the longest and best known account of Ibn Fadlan (921–22), which runs to many pages, to the shortest ones which are only a single sentence long.

Several compendia of passages on Northmen in the Arabic sources have been undertaken. In these we find mentions of Rus (Arab. *ar-Rus* or *ar-Rusiyyah*) along with *Majus*, *Nortmanni*, *Urduman*, *Warank* and variants thereof, all names that are traditionally taken to represent Northmen in various locations from the Iberian peninsula to the Caspian Sea. Among the earliest such works was the *Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici* by the Norwegian scholar Alexander Seippel from 1896. Seippel collected, and translated into Latin, accounts from fifty Arabic sources which he divided according to which name they applied to designate ‘Northmen’. Seippel’s work remains a landmark in using oriental sources for European medieval history and can to some extent be compared with the important writings of the German Christian Martin Fraehn in the nineteenth century and the Hungarian Mihály Kmósko in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who both broke much ground in using Middle Eastern sources to illuminate Eastern European history.¹¹ However, several important manuscript discoveries in the first half of the twentieth century, especially that of the Bashkir scholar Zeki Validi Togan, who in 1923 discovered new manuscripts of Ibn Fadlan and Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani in Mashhad, provided an important update for Seippel’s list.¹² In 1954 the Norwegian scholar Harris Birkeland expanded Seippel’s compilation and translated it into Norwegian along with extensive commentary and footnotes. Birkeland’s work was updated to include the vast new scholarship on oriental sources that had seen the light of day since Seippel such as the important works of Josef Marqwart, Vladimir Minorsky,

¹¹ C. M. Fraehn, *Ibn Fosqlan’s und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen älterer Zeit. Text und Übersetzung mit kritisch-philologischen Anmerkungen. Nebst drei Beilagen über sogenannte Russen-Stämme und Kiew, die Warenger und das Warenger-Meer, und das Land Wisu, ebenfalls nach arabischen Schriftstellern. Von C. M. Frähn* (St Petersburg: Buchdruckerei der Akademie, 1823); M. Kmósko, *Mohamedan irok a steppe nepeiról* [Muslim authors on the people of the steppe] I/1, ed. by I. Zimonyi (Budapest: Balassi, 1997).

¹² Now MS 5529 in the Astane Quds Museum, Mashhad, Iran.

Wilhelm Barthold and the aforementioned Togan.¹³ A few years later I. Samarra'i translated Scippel's *Rerum Normannicarum* into English with some commentary of varying usefulness.¹⁴ Finally, in Russian and Polish there are the compilations of A. Harkavy, *Skazaniya mussulmanskikh pisatelei o slavyanakh i russkikh* (Accounts of Muslim Writers on the Slavs and Russians) published in St Petersburg in 1870 and later partially translated into English by S. Rapoport in 1929¹⁵ and Tadeusz Lewicki's *Zródła arabskie do dziejów słowiańszczyzny* (Arabic sources on the history of the Slavic peoples) both emphasising accounts relating to eastern European history.¹⁶ More recently James Montgomery contributed to the volume *The Viking World* a chapter on the Vikings in the Arabic sources.¹⁷ These works are directly relevant to our study in that they contain in one place information that is scattered over numerous works from different periods. However, their primary purpose as compilations evidently restricts their potential for elaborating a historiographical narrative.

Before we proceed further, however, the passages on the early Rus we find in the Arabic sources need some precursory clarification in as much as they contrast with the information in the *Primary Chronicle* as well as the Byzantine and Latin sources. The first point to make relates to geographical positioning. While the Rus in the latter group of sources are found mainly between the Black Sea and the Baltic, and on one occasion, in the middle Rhine region, the Arabic material locates the Rus primarily in the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian, and from the Caucasus in the south to the realm of the Volga Bulgars on the confluence of the rivers Volga and Kama in the north. Later in the same group of sources the more westerly location traditionally associated with the Rus comes to light. What is presumably Kiev, in the garb of the toponym *Kuyabab*, appears in the mid-tenth century in the geography of Al-Istakhri (see chapter two, section 2.4.3.1) while other toponyms present in the *Primary Chronicle* are seemingly

¹³ H. Birkeland, *Nordens Historie i Middelalderen etter Arabiske Kilder* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1954).

¹⁴ A. I. Samarra'i, *Arabic Sources on the Norse: English Translation and Notes Based on the Texts Edited by A. Scippel in 'Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici'*, Doctoral thesis (University of Wisconsin, 1959).

¹⁵ A. Harkavy, *Skazaniya mussulmanskikh pisatelei o slavyanakh i russkikh* [Accounts of Muslim Writers on the Slavs and Russians] (St Petersburg: Tip. Imp. Akademiia Nauk, 1870), partially transl. into English by S. Rapoport, *Slavistic printings and reprintings*, no. 96 (1929).

¹⁶ T. Lewicki, *Zródła arabskie do dziejów słowiańszczyzny* [Arabic Sources on the History of the Slavs], Prace Komisji Orientalistycznej, no. 8 (Wrocław: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1977).

¹⁷ J. Montgomery, 'Arabic Sources on the Vikings', in *The Viking World*, ed. by S. Brink in collaboration with N. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 550–61.

absent. In general there is very scant information imparted on the emergence of the Kievan state in the course of the tenth century. Such momentous event in early Rus history as the official adoption of Christianity in 988 remains largely unnoticed except for a few late and sometimes confused notices. It seems that Yahya ibn Sa'īd Al-Antaki (Yahya of Antioch, d. c. 1066) was the earliest Arabic writer to document this event. He was, however, a Melkite Christian who emigrated from his native Alexandria to Antioch where he in all likelihood made use of Byzantine material for his account.¹⁸ For those Muslim writers who presumably did not have access to such material, the distance between Kiev and the Caliphate becomes palpable. Thus Marwazi writing in the late eleventh/early twelfth century has the Rus converting to Christianity around 912, and subsequently to Islam because Christianity had “blunted their swords”.¹⁹ The geographical context and the Muslim writer’s perception and ideas of the northern regions will be examined in more detail in chapter two.

The second point concerns depictions in the sources of social processes and structures. The notices on the Rus we obtain from the Arabic sources have little to do with state formation, which has been a key theme in traditional Rus historiography. This process has received particular attention especially because of a passage in the *Primary Chronicle* which describes how Rus, or Varangians, were called in from Scandinavia to rule over the Slavs.²⁰ This passage in turn, engendered the notion among some scholars that the Eastern Slavs were not developed enough to create a stable form of government or political system. This idea was further abused in the nationalistic dialogue of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and fuelled the pro-Normannist stance in the so-called Normannist controversy. The Rus portrayed by the Arabic sources, on the other hand, seem far-removed from any aspirations to establish an organized political

¹⁸ W. E. Watson, ‘Arabic Perceptions of Russia’s Christian Conversion’, in *The Millennium: Russia and Christianity, AD 988–1988*, ed. by Albert Leong (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), pp. 33–40; Lawrence I. Conrad, ‘Yahya of Antioch’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. in chief A. P. Kazhdan, vol. 3 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 2213.

¹⁹ V. Minorsky, *Sbaraf al-Zaman Tabir Marwazi on China, the Turks, and India* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), p. 23 (Arabic) and p. 36 (English). For other Muslim accounts of the Rus conversion to Christianity see P. B. Golden, ‘Rus’, *EI2*, p. 626–27.

²⁰ *Primary Chronicle*, p. 59: “The tributaries of the Varangians drove them back beyond the sea and, refusing them further tribute, set out to govern themselves. There was no law among them, but tribe rose against tribe. Discord thus ensued among them, and they began to war one against another. They said to themselves, “Let us seek princes who may rule over us and judge us according to the Law””.

entity with fixed boundaries.²¹ On the contrary, they are primarily depicted as rather small and often itinerant groups of people engaged in various tasks in different locations. On the whole they are depicted as communities or bands that mostly subsisted on trade or, to a lesser degree, acted as raiders or as hired soldiers and guards. Moreover, in contrast to their portrayal in the *Primary Chronicle* as coming over to rule the Slavs, and also contrary to the heavy sway Northmen held in other parts of Europe through raiding in this period, the Rus in the Arabic sources can be seen to partake more subordinately in a rather different power structure, largely dominated by the Khazars who reigned over a vast territory of South-Eastern Europe, and also the Bulgars with their important trading emporium in the mid-Volga region.

Numerous accounts of contacts between the Rus and these peoples have survived. Ibn Khurradadhbih, writing in the 840s, tells that the Rus pass through Khazaria to the Caspian Sea where they sail to Jurjan with their merchandise, and that they sometimes travel all the way to Baghdad on camelback.²² Ibn Rustah, writing around 900, states that those who carry out trade with the Volga Bulgars are the Khazars and the Rus, who also sell their slaves to them.²³ According to Al-Mas'udi, writing in the mid-tenth century, the Rus live in Atil (or Itil), presumably the most important city of the Khazars at the time, along with peoples of all religions. In complex legal matters they are reported to confer with the Muslim judges, and we are told that they are soldiers of the Khazar ruler.²⁴ Elsewhere Al-Mas'udi reports that what is probably the Azov Sea belongs to the Rus and that no one else navigates there but them. In yet another place he claims that they live in the vicinity of the Caucasus. According to this same writer, they appear to be on good terms with the Khazar rulers who in 912 allowed them to use the lower Volga to enter the Caspian Sea in order to raid peoples living on its coastline. This was in exchange for half of what they would amass through their plundering. In short, our sources seem to underline a special relationship between the Rus and the Khazars on one hand, and the Rus and the Volga Bulgars on the other hand. This relationship appears to have rested mainly on

²¹ We will address Ibn Fadlan's attribution of a 'king' to the Rus in chapter five.

²² Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*, pp. 115–16.

²³ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-'laq an-nafisah*, p. 141.

²⁴ Al-Mas'udi, *Muraj adb-dhabab*, p. 187.

trade and diplomatic conventions that were lucrative for all three of them. Several sources from a later period appear to commemorate the relationship between the Rus and the Khazars. For instance, the anonymous *Mujmal al-Tavarikh*, dated to 1126, which refers to them as brothers.²⁵ Such references, more of which will be examined in the following chapter, may also be aligned with the information from several different sources: The *Annals of St Bertin* (s.a. 839),²⁶ Ibn Rustah in c. 900,²⁷ and the anonymous Persian geographical work *Hudud Al-Alam*²⁸ from the late tenth century, report that the leader of the Rus bears the title *khaqan* or 'kaghan'. The 'kaghan' is in fact a well attested title among the Turkic peoples, including the Khazars.²⁹ This particular issue has been widely commented on and, by extension, has raised the question whether there existed in fact a Rus Kaghanate, which we shall address in the final chapter of the dissertation.³⁰

The Byzantine material meanwhile offers little information on this Rus-Khazar-Bulghar relationship. From the earliest references in the sermon of Patriarch Photios, which were composed shortly after the mid-ninth century, to the works of Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus and Leo the Deacon written a century later, the Rus are reported either as subsisting on the north-south axis from Novgorod to the Dniepr or as attacking or trading with Byzantium.³¹ The depiction of the relationship between the Rus and Khazars in the *Primary*

²⁵ *Mujmal al-Tavarikh* (anon.), ed. and published by Muhammad Taqi Bahar (Teheran, 1939).

²⁶ "Theophilus [...] also sent with the envoys [i.e. the Byzantine embassy] some men who said they...were called Russians [Rhos] and had been sent to him by their king whose name was the Khagan [chacanus]. Theophilus requested in his letter that the Emperor in his goodness might grant them safe conducts to travel through his empire and any help or practical assistance they needed to return home, for the route by which they had reached Constantinople had taken them through primitive tribes that were very fierce and savage and Theophilus did not wish them to return that way in case some disaster befell them. When the Emperor investigated more closely the reason for their coming here, he discovered that they belonged to the people of the Swedes." (*The Annals of St-Bertin*, transl. by J. L. Nelson, Ninth-Century Histories I (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 134).

²⁷ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, p. 145.

²⁸ *Hudud al-Alam*, p. 159.

²⁹ See P. B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992).

³⁰ For different views see Ildar Garipzanov, 'The Annals of St. Bertin (839) and *Chacanus* of the Rhos', *Ruthenica*, no. 5 (2006), 7–11 and P. B. Golden 'The Question of the Rus Qaganate', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1982), 76–97.

³¹ *De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 57–63; *The History of Leo the Deacon*, transl., introd. and annot. by A.–M. Talbot and D. F. Sullivan (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2005), books VIII and IX, pp. 175–201; *The Homilies of Patriarch Photios of Constantinople*, transl., introd. and comm. by C. Mango (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953) no. III and IV, pp. 74–110.

Chronicle, on the other hand, does not reflect a mutually beneficial alliance of any kind. Apart from the claim that Khazars resided in Kiev, which is not further elaborated or explained, they are mainly portrayed as inimical tax collectors who were ultimately defeated by the forces of Svyatoslav at some point in the mid-960s.³² One of the aims of his attack may have been to acquire tax-lands belonging to the Khazars such as the Viatichi upon whom Svyatoslav imposed tribute in the following years.³³ The chronicle was compiled long after the Khazars had disappeared from the stage but it is still possible that their name evoked a poignant sentiment in people's minds. Indeed some traditions commemorating the once vast and powerful state of the Khazars must have lingered on. Safely removed from them in space and time, the chronicler may have employed this notion to enhance the glorious predestination of Kievan Rus and the heroism of its princes. While the historicity of the exact portrayal of Rus-Khazar interactions in the *Primary Chronicle* may be debated, we know from other sources that the latter were known to aggressively exact tribute from their neighbours, and the chronicler's prevailing bias against the Khazars may arise from such oppression aimed towards Kievans or other peoples with which the chronicler identified himself.

From this brief look at the written source material we can see that the Arabic texts convey an image of the Rus that differs significantly from the narrative of the *Primary Chronicle*, as well as other material available to us. This raises the question of whether we are to interpret our evidence as different representations of the same group or in fact of several different or detached groups. From the latter perspective, the question is in what way should we understand and describe these differences?

Given the nature of the written sources, they alone are unlikely to solve the matter. What is needed in addressing this problem is a cross-disciplinary approach, where evidence from several fields of research must be applied in gaining a fuller picture of the early Rus. With this objective in mind, we shall

³² *The Primary Chronicle*, pp. 59, 61 and 84.

³³ S. Franlin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, pp. 143–45.

bring in tools from the social sciences (below in this chapter), as well as archaeology and numismatic evidence (in chapter four).

1.2 Earlier Historiographic Approaches

On the whole, the Arabic sources seem to communicate a special relationship between the Rus and the dominant Turkic peoples in Eastern Europe over a significant period of time. This is attested by several writers from different periods. Despite such indications of these contacts, however, this aspect of early Rus history has been surprisingly neglected. Whereas the reasons for this neglect are partly defined by the scope of the *Primary Chronicle*, in the case of Soviet scholarship it is to no lesser extent due to nationalistic trends and politically conditioned bias and censorship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where the part played by non-Slavic peoples in the historical past of Eastern Europe was significantly diminished or eliminated.

The case of the prominent historian, Boris Grekov, illustrates the complicated situation faced by some Soviet scholars. In his major work on Kievan Rus, first appearing in 1939, there is a marked anti-Khazar bias. For instance, when Grekov acknowledges the cross-cultural currents prevailing in medieval Rus, he leaves out the Turkic peoples despite the fact that they were an adjacent cultural entity. Instead he recounts the better known splendours of the era such as Persian and Chinese fabrics, Byzantine brocades and Arabic silver. Such a concession to non-Slavic elements influencing Rus culture is then immediately followed by a stark reminder of the author's stance: "These elements were transformed by the artistic genius of Rus and became part of indigenous Russian art. The explanation of this indisputable fact lies in the antiquity and stability of the Russian people's own traditions."³⁴ A still more explicit anti-Turkic sentiment appears in Grekov's discussion of the expansive trade routes from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Caspian where he describes the Khazar 'kingdom' as "a

³⁴ B. Grekov, *Kiev Rus*, transl. from the Russian by Y. Sdobnikov, ed. by D. Ogden (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), p. 530.

parasitic state” representing a “predatory semi-nomadic economic system.”³⁵ Finally, he states that the ‘Khazar problem’ was ‘solved’ by Svyatoslav. Indeed Grekov and many of his contemporaries were coerced into writing a history that was looked upon favourably by the Communist state. In the 1930s and 1940s there was a clear policy to ‘adjust’ historians’ positions with the primary aim of legitimizing Stalin’s political supremacy and that of the Communist Party.³⁶ Certain developments in the early twentieth century bear witness to and fuelled Stalin’s Anti-Turkic and anti-Jewish stance. Some of his main opponents within the Communist Party in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Lev Trotskii and Lev Kamenev, were Jews. Mention may also be made of the so-called *Doctors’ Plot* in 1952–53, when a group of predominantly Jewish doctors in Moscow were accused of being conspiratorial assassins of Soviet leaders, which after Stalin’s death in 1953 the government admitted to be a complete fabrication.³⁷ Important were also surges of Turkic nationalism after the fall of the Russian tsars, exemplified in the establishment of the short-lived Idel-Ural state (Tatar and Bashkir for Volga-Ural) between 1917 and 1921, and its clandestine existence until 1929.

In the course of the second half of the twentieth century the Khazars were further assigned an antagonist role in Russian history. Important in the promulgation of such views was Lev Gumilev, whose ideas on the nefarious impact of the Khazars’ gained significant support from the 1960’s onwards.³⁸

It is more difficult to explain the reluctance of scholars that were *not* obliged to conform their researches to the demands of the Soviet regime to give serious consideration to the Turkic peoples in their studies on the Rus, and indeed to the larger political and cultural context of the peoples of Eastern Europe during this

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 588.

³⁶ See V. T. Tikhonov, ‘The Russian State and the Interpretation of History during the Second World War: The Impact of B. I. Syaromyatnikov’s *The ‘Regulated’ State of Peter the Great and its Ideology*’, in *Power and Culture: Identity, Ideology, representation* ed. by J. Osmond and A. Cimдина (Pisa: Edizioni Plus, 2007), pp. 139–50.

³⁷ D. Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, ed. and trans. by H. Shukman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), p. 571.

³⁸ See, for example, V. Shnirelmann, *The Myth of the Khazars and Intellectual Antisemitism in Russia, 1970s–1990s*. (Jerusalem: The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Hebrew University, 2000). Also D. Schorkowitz, ‘Die Herkunft der Ostslaven und die Anfänge des Kiever Reiches in der postsowjetische Revision’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2000), 569–601 (p. 592).

period. In the case of scholarship on Scandinavian history and the Viking age, under which the subject usually falls, this may partly be explained by the near absence of this context in the Old Norse literature. This, in turn, may probably be attributed to its considerably late composition in the thirteenth century and onwards. Important factors are also the distance of its places of composition from the geographical region in question, and also that the role of the Turkic peoples in the western Eurasian steppe becomes less prominent after the tenth century with the increased importance and expansion of the Rus state centred in Kiev on the river Dniepr. Trends in Soviet scholarship regarding the Turkic peoples may also have influenced this development as well as restrictions on access to archaeological material and Soviet research in general. Ingmar Jansson wrote as late as 1985 that Ture J. Arne was then “still the only scholar who has been in the position to base his opinions on first-hand knowledge of museum collections and excavations in both Scandinavia and Russia”.³⁹

On the whole, much weight has been put on the evidence of Old East Slavonic, Byzantine and to some extent on the Old Norse sources, all of which convey minimal information on contacts between the Rus and the Turkic peoples. The reduction, and sometimes complete omission, of the part played by the Turkic peoples and, further, a tendency to avoid serious engagement with the evidence of the Arabic sources, is notable not least among scholars writing from the viewpoint of Scandinavian history on various aspects of the eastward expansion of the Vikings.

This position has played itself out in various ways. Egil Mikkelsen, for instance, in two contributions on Islam in Scandinavia and Vikings and Islam, all but completely eschews the Khazars or the Volga Bulgars. This he does even though these peoples must be regarded as a possible source for any Islamic influence in Eastern Europe or Scandinavia, indeed arguably more so than the

³⁹ I. Jansson, ‘Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age’, in *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, vol. IV, *Der Handel der Karolinger- und Wikingerzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1987), pp. 773–807 (p. 775).

Caliphate itself (see the discussion below on Islam in Khazaria and Bulghar).⁴⁰ In *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia*, where Mikkelsen's prior contribution was published, the editor Elisabeth Piltz mentions Abbasid missionary activity in Bulghar but only really does so in passing.⁴¹ In a different context, Torsten Edgren's study on the eastern route of the Vikings reduces it to cover merely Finland and North-western Russia.⁴² In the same volume, where Rus are indeed equated with Vikings, we find a map of their raids. Significantly, none of their reported raids on the Caspian Sea reported by the Arabic writers is marked there. A similar tendency is noticeable in Jens Peter Schjødt's study on Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus, which will be examined more thoroughly in chapter three. In short, Schjødt duly acknowledges certain difficulties in comparing this work to Scandinavian sources composed several centuries later in a very different context. However, he fails to take proper notice of the cultural setting in which the ritual, as described by Ibn Fadlan, takes place, and the important Turkic peoples we have mentioned are ignored (see chapter three, p. 112).⁴³

Another tendency in the same vein is to adapt the Arabic material to fit the evidence provided by other sources, especially the *Primary Chronicle*, the archaeological record and even in some cases the Old Norse literature. A vivid example is the not uncommon interpretation of the following notice in Ibn

⁴⁰ E. Mikkelsen, 'Islam and Scandinavia during the Viking Age', in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia: Acts of a Symposium at Uppsala University*, June 15–16 1996, ed. by E. Piltz. (Gothenburg: 1998), pp. 39–52, and 'The Vikings and Islam' in *The Viking World*, pp. 543–49).

⁴¹ E. Piltz, 'Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia', in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia: Acts of a Symposium at Uppsala University*, 27–38 (p. 28).

⁴² T. Edgren, 'The Eastern Route: Finland in the Viking Age', in *Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga*, ed. by W. W. Fitzhugh and E. I. Ward (Washington, D.C., and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), pp. 103–15.

⁴³ It is true that the language of the Volga Bulgars as well as that of the Khazars has been difficult to ascertain with precision, that is exactly what type of Turkic they spoke. Following their conversion to Islam, the Volga Bulgars applied the Arabic script. Important vestiges of their language have been preserved on gravestones, see for instance M. Erdal, *Die Sprache der wolgabulgarischen Inschriften* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993); A. H. Khalikov and J. G. Muhametsin, 'Unpublished Volga Bulgarian Inscriptions', *Acta Orientalia Hungarorum*, no. XXXI (1977), 107–25, and F.S. Hakimzjanov, 'New Volga Bulgarian Inscriptions', *Acta Orientalia Hungarorum*, no. XL (1986), 173–77, which includes photographs of tombstones, the text in Arabic letters, Latin transcription and an English translation. It is now generally held that they spoke the so-called Chuvash-type Turkic, which is an anachronistic designation of their language based on its apparent similarities with the modern Chuvash language, spoken in the Chuvash Republic (see e.g. Zimonyi, *The Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, p. 84–86 and I. Hrbek, 'Bulghar', *EI2*, pp. 1304–08).

Rustah's *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, written shortly after 900, as referring to Gorodishche in North-western Russia.⁴⁴

As for the Rusiyyah they live on an island (or peninsula) surrounded by a lake. It takes a three days' journey to cross the island, which is covered with forest and thickets. It is plague-stricken (or infested, pestilent), and the soil is so damp that it moves underneath people's feet.⁴⁵

Such an interpretation is problematic in a number of ways. To begin with, the author provides no geographical location for their purported whereabouts of the Rus. Secondly, the description of infestation and uninviting soil (e.g. *ard al-muntina*) is a common topos in Arabic geographical textual descriptions and mapping of far-off places. The lack of geography for this location is also in contrast with Ibn Rustah's descriptions of other peoples in his text in whose case it is normally given. Yet another obstacle for placing it so far north is the general lack of geographical information among the Muslim geographers about those regions, as we will discuss in further detail in chapter two. Furthermore, it seems that Ibn Rustah did not travel through all the places he described and was in many cases not able to verify the information he included in his work.⁴⁶ Judging from his description, it seems unlikely that he had a firm idea of the whereabouts of the Rus at the time of writing and what survives of his text may also represent a conflation of more than one account. A further indication of his confusion may be that he later claims that "they [the Rus] do not have houses or land, or villages or cultivated fields", yet a little after that Ibn Rustah states that they possess several urban centres.

Of note in our context is Wladyslaw Duczko's approach in his recent monograph entitled *Viking Rus*. Although predominantly an archaeological study it is by and

⁴⁴ See, for example, E. A. Melnikova, *The Eastern World of the Vikings: Eight Essays About Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1996), p. 52, who states that this is the consensus of the majority of historians. See also S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, pp. 40–41, although they do take Ibn Rustah's general confusion into account. P. H. Sawyer, however, acknowledges that Ibn Rustah's information may be spurious (P. H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD. 700–1100* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 116).

⁴⁵ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, pp. 145–46. The Arabic writers seem to have employed the names *Rus* and *Rusiyyah* even-handedly, the ending *-iyyah* gives the word an adjectival meaning of provenance.

⁴⁶ See discussion in J. E. Montgomery, 'Ibn Rustah's Lack of 'Eloquence', the Rus, and Samanid Cosmography', *Edebiyat*, vol. 12 (2001), 73–93 (pp. 85–87).

large supported with written sources. His interpretation of Ibn Fadlan's account of a funeral among the Rus whom he encountered on his journey to the Volga Bulgars in 921 reveals a rather peculiar attempt at manipulating the evidence by interspersing Old Norse words - where they are of course nowhere to be found in Ibn Fadlan's Arabic text - apparently to heighten the reader's sense of the Rus described by him as authentic Norsemen:

When these basic problems [of inheritance] were settled it was time for the *veizla*, a feast, held to the honour of the deceased, the man part having the form of drinking, which included drinking *erfiol*, inheritance beer.

The Rus drank *uslettuliga* "without restrain"...

It is most possible that the relatives and companions of the dead man were *drekka brullaup*, "drinking the wedding".⁴⁷

Such treatment somewhat belittles Ibn Fadlan's account which holds a unique place among the Arabic sources on the Rus both because it is the most substantial and detailed description we possess of them as well as the best known and most frequently studied one. It is the only text from this period that provides an eyewitness account detailing various aspects of their community. At the same time it is highly complex text which provides insights into intricate networks of peoples and places and is open to various interpretations. One of the important features of the text is the usage of Arabo-Islamic concepts that must be dealt with in its proper context. As we shall see below, Duczko is by no means the only scholar to overlook the nature of this and other Arabic texts and the multifarious cultural contexts they convey, both on behalf of the observer and the observed.

In *The Emergence of the Rus: 750-1200*, which has become one of the authoritative works on the early history of the Rus, J. Shepard and S. Franklin adopt a more nuanced approach to the concepts of ethnicity and identity. Thus it is stated at the very beginning of their book that "only in nationalist fantasy can the word 'Russia' stand for a kind of Platonic form, immanent even when invisible, constant in essence though variable in its historical embodiments", and that in

⁴⁷ W. Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*, Northern World, vol. 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 144-45.

their approach modern national identities and boundaries are irrelevant. Additionally, the authors incorporate on a number of occasions the evidence of the Arabic sources as well as considering the wider cultural and political context of the region. The evidence of important writers such as Al-Mas'udi and Ibn Fadlan is included, especially in discussions of Rus military or mercantile activities in the mid- to lower Volga and Caspian region.⁴⁸ As the work is laid out, however, the Arabic sources are rather peripheral to their narrative and there is little in-depth analysis of the evidence of each individual Arabic text and its context of production. This work and the numerous contributions of Shepard on various aspects of the history of the Rus are nevertheless of particular importance, as we will see further on.

More influential for the approach taken in this dissertation, however, are two scholars who, incidentally, are not specialists on the history of the Rus or of Scandinavia. They have written on the Rus from a different standpoint, that is without the tradition of the *Primary Chronicle* or the sometimes narrow view of Viking age studies impinging on their works. Peter B. Golden, a historian of medieval Eurasia and Turkologist, and James Montgomery, a scholar of Arabo-Islamic studies, have both thoroughly examined the Arabic sources with regard to their contents about the Rus. In his article on the Rus in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Golden suggested that it may be viable to view the Rus in the Arabic sources as being at a stage in development “as they began to penetrate Eastern Europe, not as an ethnos, in the strict sense of the term, for this could shift as new ethnic elements were added, but rather as a commercial and political organisation.”⁴⁹

Montgomery, in his study and translation of Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus, agrees with this approach and adds that “in a time of such manifest change and lack of imposition of cultural uniformity, it would be unwise to look for unanimous consistency among the Rus, each group of whom may have represented a variable level of assimilation.” He furthermore regards the Rus “as a more fluid social unit than recent scholarship has hitherto, often with its

⁴⁸ S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, pp. 69 and 88, for instance.

⁴⁹ P. B. Golden, ‘Rus’ in *EI2*, p. 621.

interests firmly vested in nationalistic concerns, been willing to acknowledge”.⁵⁰ Montgomery explores a variety of identities for the Rus in Ibn Fadlan’s account but emphasises that Ibn Fadlan’s picture is one of “a people in the process of ethnic, social and cultural adaptation” and, at one point, suggests that they may have been exposed to the influence of both the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars.⁵¹ More recently, Montgomery has reiterated this view with regard to the Rus guards in Khazaria, as reported to us by Al-Mas’udi in the mid-tenth century (see chapter two).

The interpretations of Golden and especially Montgomery provide an important premise to examine the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars as not only a politically and economically important for the Rus but also culturally. This context will be further elaborated in this dissertation, and it will be argued that the Rus not only travelled and traded among these peoples perhaps for several generations, but also maintained cultural interaction with them, and that these prolonged contacts are reflected in some of the existing evidence. Below we shall explore some of the processes involved in such cultural contacts with the aid of analytical tools provided by the social sciences. First, however, we shall consider the wider historical context preliminary to these contacts.

1.3 Political and Cultural Contexts

Before the appearance of the Rus, large parts of eastern Europe had for centuries been the realm of predominantly Altaic and also Iranian peoples and the Turkic Khazars began to emerge as a distinct entity around 630. The Khazars consolidated their power in the Western Eurasian Steppe mainly by their conquest of Kubrat’s Bulghar state north of the Black Sea early in the second half of the seventh century and had established themselves as the major military and economic power of the region. Over the next three centuries their importance

⁵⁰ J. E. Montgomery, ‘Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah’, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, no. 3 (2000), 1–25, (p. 4).

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 5. P. Foote and D. M. Wilson (*The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970), p. 408), also note the possibility of Turkic influence on the Rus, although they do so only in passing.

increased steadily and at the height of their domination their area of influence expanded over a vast region (see fig. 1). Apart from their wars and strife with neighbouring clans and tribes whom they sought to subjugate and extract tax from, their political orientation was chiefly marked by two salient aspects which may also have a bearing on our view of the cultural milieu of the early Rus.

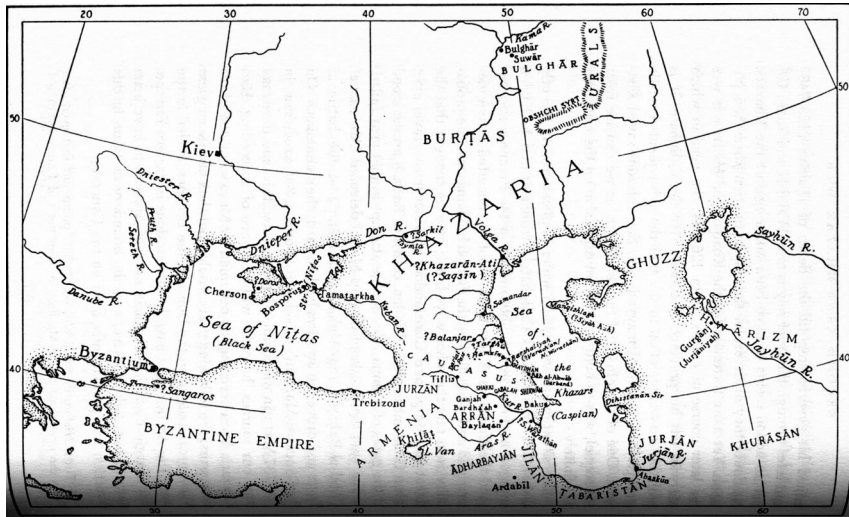


Figure. 1. The lands of the Khazars and their neighbours (from D. M. Douglas, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, p. 88).

The first is the Khazars' long-standing contacts with Byzantium, where one manifestation of many was the marriage between the daughter of the Khazar kaghan and Leo the Isaurian (future emperor Constantine V) in 732. Their son Leo was called "the Khazar". The main objective of this alliance from the point of view of the Byzantines was probably to have the Khazars form a line of defence against incursions from the Steppe while the Khazars themselves would have benefitted from Byzantine support for the same purpose. Another fruit of these mutual interests was the construction of a fort at Sarkel on the lower Don in the 830s. This alliance did not, however, preclude the Khazars from attempting expansion in regions contiguous to their own such as the Crimea and Abkhazia where they opposed and even thwarted Byzantine presence.⁵²

⁵² P. B. Golden, 'The Peoples of the Russian Forest Belt', in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. by Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 229–55 (pp. 264–65).

The second aspect, and a more important one since it had direct impact on our source material, is the Khazars' relations with the Caliphate immediately to the south. Contacts between Khazars and Muslims were inimical from the beginning since the former posed a serious opposition to the Caliphate's northwards expansion. The first of the Arab-Khazar wars was waged between 642 and 652 and brought little gain for the Muslims.⁵³ The highlight of these series of battles was the Arab advances towards Balanjar, well into Khazar territory, which, however, turned out to be temporary. Important developments for the northwards advance of the Arabs were taking place elsewhere in the Caucasus at a similar time. The victory of the Arabs over the Persians at Nihawand in 642 facilitated the Arabs' advances into not only Central Asia but also to the north, into Azerbaijan and the Caucasus.⁵⁴ After a period of roughly seventy years in which peace and conflict interchanged, the next major Arab incursion into Khazaria took place in 722.⁵⁵ After steadily increasing warfare it seems that the Arabs made considerable progress, among other feats by capturing the city of Balanjar just north of Derbend where they had not been successful in the first war against the Khazars. The Khazars, however, made a devastating counter-offensive in 730 where large numbers of Muslims were killed and a great loss for them was the death of the veteran general Jarrah in that same year. The Khazar advance even reached as far south as Dyarbakir⁵⁶ and if it had not been clear before, it was now plain to the Caliph that the Khazars posed a significant threat. In 731 the Muslim army with the general Maslamah at its head retaliated and after severe fighting it managed to capture Bab al-Abwab (Derbend) and, at least for some period and to some extent, to settle there. Again the Arabs attacked in 737 with the subsequent conversion of the Khazar kaghan to Islam at the behest of general Marwan ibn Muhammad.⁵⁷

Marwan's efforts were possibly as close as the Arabs came to converting a part of Khazaria into a Muslim province. Marwan returned to contend for the Caliphate

⁵³ See D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 41–57 for a detailed account of the First Arab–Khazar war, and W. Barthold, 'Khazars', *EI2*, pp. 1172–81.

⁵⁴ D. M. Lang, *Armenia: Cradle of Civilization* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), p. 176.

⁵⁵ For more on these conflicts see Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 58–88. The Khazars attacked the Arabs as well on a few occasions but similarly did not settle in the conquered lands in the southern foothills of the Caucasus.

⁵⁶ D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, pp. 70–71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 79, citing Bal'ami, p. 538.

in 744 and did not engage in further attempts to conquer Khazaria and the northern boundaries of the Caliphate were to be permanently fixed on the Caucasus.⁵⁸ The Khazars, in turn, converted to Judaism at some point possibly around 800, although the precise date has not been established, and apparently adhered to that religion until the collapse of their state according to numerous references by later Muslim writers.⁵⁹ It seems, at any rate, that this was the religion of the kaghanal house and its surrounding elite and thus does not have to mean that earlier advances of Islam left no traces in the Khazar community. Indeed we do have evidence of the coexistence of religions, where Jews, Muslims, Christians and idolaters seem to have lived side by side in Khazar towns.⁶⁰ Thus Ibn Hawqal writes in the second half of the tenth century that the inhabitants of Samandar “are Muslims, followers of other religions [supposedly Christians and Jews are meant here] and idolaters” and that the town has mosques, churches and synagogues.⁶¹ Around 950 Al-Mas‘udi also describes a similar situation in Atil, the main city and emporium of the Khazars, where each group had their own laws and judges.⁶²

In the middle of the eighth century following the ascent of the Abbasid caliphs the Arab-Khazar strife gradually diminished and it was not long until signs of increased trade appeared. By the late eighth or the early ninth century there was already a thriving commerce between the Caliphate and peoples in and north of the Caucasus which brought with it elements of the Muslim faith and Arabo-Islamic culture.

An important aspect of the Khazars military organization was the incorporation of professional soldiers and guards of diverse origins into the service of the kaghanal house. Peter Golden has pointed out that a similar practice existed across the Eurasian continent and consisted fundamentally of

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 87. Dunlop in fact suggests that the following dynastic struggle between the Umayyads and the Abbasids, who ascended only a few years later in 750, effectively saved Khazaria from becoming a Muslim province.

⁵⁹ See Al-Istakhri, *Al-masalik al-mamalik*, p. 220; Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-ard*, p. 390; Muqaddasi, *Ahsan at-taqasim fi ma'rifat al-aqalim*, p. 360; Ibn Fadlan, *Risalab*, pp. 171–12; Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, p. 139.

⁶⁰ Rather than religious ‘tolerance’ since religion seems to have decided to some extent one’s social conditions.

⁶¹ Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-ard*, p. 392.

⁶² See chapter two below. Also in Muqaddasi, *Ahsan at-taqasim fi ma'rifat al-aqalim*, p. 360

warriors under the leadership of and eventually attached by bonds of personal loyalty to a warlord, prince or king. These were mostly young men, often of diverse origins, who for a variety of reasons (largely having to do with the prospect of war booty and fame) were attracted to charismatic war leaders. These war-bands were, in their early stages, of a temporary nature deriving from *Männerbunde*⁶³

Al-Mas'udi writes in the middle of the tenth century that both Rus and also Muslims constitute each a special section of the army/bodyguard under the command of the Khazar kaghan. As noted above, James Montgomery has recently suggested that the Rus encountered by Ibn Fadlan may have been connected with this institution (see further in chapter three).⁶⁴ Another aspect of Khazar polity involved vassalage, an example of which are the Burtas who were probably located along the northern part of the lower Volga south of Bulghar. Ibn Rustah, writing shortly after 900, describes them as being subjugated to the Khazars, supplying them with 10,000 soldiers. The Burtas are reported to lack a proper ruler themselves and, apart from consulting with the elders among them, in principle obey the rule of the Khazar prince (Arab. *amir*)⁶⁵

Farther to the north, in the mid-Volga region, the Bulgars had established an emporium in the ninth century, which with increased trade with the Samanids of northern Iran in the tenth century became especially important. The Volga Bulgars feature prominently in the Arabic sources, and, as mentioned above, the Rus are often associated with them. At some point around 900 or shortly thereafter the Bulgars converted to Islam, which endowed them with certain leverage towards the Khazars under whose subjugation they were still to some extent by the time Ibn Fadlan visited them in 922 and to whom they paid tax. In the course of the tenth century, Bulghar increased in importance as a commercial hub and began minting their own coins in imitation of the Arabic coins which found their way in large quantities to the middle Volga. Particularly important for the ascent of the Bulgars was the shift by the end of the ninth century of the trade route between the Caliphate and the north from the Caucasus to the east of

⁶³ P. B. Golden, 'Some Notes on the Comitatus in Medieval Eurasia with Special Reference to the Khazars', *Histoire Russe*, vol. 28, no 1 (2001), 153–170 (p. 154).

⁶⁴ J. Montgomery, 'Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources,' in *Living Islamic History: Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*, ed. by Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh, 2010), pp. 151–65.

⁶⁵ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, p. 140.

the Caspian, from Samanid controlled northern Iran through the Ust Yurt and onwards. This situation diminished the ability of the Khazars to levy taxes and customs, and will inevitably have spelled the beginnings of their demise, ending in their disappearance as a distinct polity in the late tenth century.⁶⁶ In the end the Bulghar state long outlived the Khazars and came to an end only with the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century.

Even such a brief overview is suggestive of the rich and variegated cultural, political and economic milieu in which the early Rus entered, according to the Arabic sources. Although our evidence is often sparse, we can see the outlines of the spread of customs and religion, especially northwards, and it is clear that while Islam can be seen to predominate, all three monotheistic religions had some presence in the region as well as the traditional Turkic religions, mostly believed to have been based on or similar to the cult of Tengri.⁶⁷ It may for example suggest to us that traces of Islam among Northmen⁶⁸ may go back to their presence in Khazaria and Volga Bulgharia rather than their direct contacts with the Islamic Caliphate itself, for which we have scarce evidence.⁶⁹ Only Ibn Khurradadhbih writing in the mid-ninth century refers to Rus making it all the way to the Caliphate although it is possible that they did so over some period of time. It seems, however, that with the emergence of the trade emporia in Khazar and later in Bulghar, they had little need for travelling far into the Muslim lands to sell off their merchandise.⁷⁰

Our sources furthermore indicate that the Khazars did not have ample resources themselves.⁷¹ Rather, they controlled a key emporium, exceptionally well located connecting both with the North-South trade route and the western extreme of the Silk Road. Several factors in particular, the hiring of mercenaries as part of strengthening the guard or the army, the impetus to buy goods and levy tax of merchants and possibly the implementation of vassalage may be seen as providing

⁶⁶ S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, p. 109.

⁶⁷ See 'Tengri', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by M. Eliade, vol. 14 (New York: McMillan, 1987), pp. 401–03.

⁶⁸ It seems, however, that none of the articles in the volume *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia* (1998), nor E. Mikkelsen's contribution from 2008 explore this possibility.

⁶⁹ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*, p. 155.

⁷⁰ See further on the development of their trade routes in chapter four.

⁷¹ P. B. Golden, 'The Peoples of the Russian Forest Belt', p. 270.

a situation for which the Rus were ideally suited. They clutched onto this thriving commerce with their own ‘specialty’ input, mainly furs and slaves and their specific military and martial skills. Their preferred means of payment in exchange was the Arabic silver dirham of which large quantities have been unearthed along a trail from the Caucasus westwards and northwards all the way to the Baltic and Scandinavia which we shall examine in chapter four.

1.4 Origins, Identity, Ethnicity

1.4.1 Etymology

Much has been written on the etymology of the term ‘Rus’. The most commonly accepted is one that was already advanced by Vilhelm Thomsen in the late nineteenth century and since then reworked or refined by several scholars. It is based on the premise that Finn. *Ruotsi* (Finnish for Sweden today), and other Finnic or Finno-Ugrian versions of that name, derived from an Old Swedish *Rofsz*, ‘rowing, band of rowers’, and that, in turn, the Old Finnish form gave rise to an Old East Slavonic *Rus*’, which subsequently became the Greek *Rhos* and the Arabic *ar-Rus*.⁷² A second hypothesis was centred on hydronyms such as *Ros-* and *Rus-* in the region where Slavic peoples are believed to have settled during the early medieval period in what is modern Ukraine.⁷³ The third option was to look for a more southerly origin for the name, thus explaining Rus as deriving from the *Roxolani* of classical Greek writers (Ptolemy, Strabo), *Rosomoni* of Jordanes or *Hros* of the Syrian Pseudo-Zachariah (Zacharia Rhetor).⁷⁴

Even though the *rofz-ruotsi-rus* theory is usually regarded as plausible, the evidence to support it is rather weak as there are no written sources that attest to the transmission of the name, and no Old Norse sources or rune stones refer to their east-faring contingents with it. The latter two theories are usually not considered

⁷² S. Ekbo, ‘The Etymology of Finnish Ruotsi ‘Sweden’’, in *Les Pays du Nord et Byzance (Scandinavie et Byzance)*, Actes du colloque d’Upsal 20–22 avril 1979, ed. by R. Zeitler (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1981), pp. 143–45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

likely solutions. In case of the hydronym etymology we would expect some sort of an ending meaning ‘of...Ros/Rus’ and, furthermore, it has a short vowel where the name Rus’/Rhos/Rus in Slavonic, Greek and Arabic has a long one. Regarding the names found with Greek and Syriac writers, these are too early and predate all other evidence we have of the Rus by several centuries.⁷⁵

In addition to these theories two alternatives can be considered. The first one is that Rus derives from Old Turkic *urus-*, a reciprocal form meaning ‘to fight (oneself)’, which is possibly related to Chuvash *virash* and Hungarian *orosz* meaning ‘Russian’. The Arabic sources do indeed mention that the Rus fight among themselves,⁷⁶ and in contrast to our lack of sources on the Finno-Ugric peoples who are thought to have transmitted the *rop̄z̄-* form southwards, we do have abundant data on contacts between the Turkic peoples and both Byzantium and the Arabs.⁷⁷ Secondly, it may derive from biblical *Rosh/Rhos* of the book of Ezekiel (38.2, “Son of man, set thy face against Gog, and the land of Magog, Rhos, prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him”), the Greek form here being identical for the figure and their northern neighbours so named (*ῥωσ*).⁷⁸ This name may then have made its way into Arabic as *Rus* during the flourishing of cultural and diplomatic interchange that took place between Byzantium and the Islamic Caliphate from the late eighth century onwards. This solution may furthermore be supported with the practice among Arab writers of referring to northern barbarians or regions as Gog and Magog (Arab. *yajuj wa majuj*) in geographical treatises and maps (see further discussion in chapter two).

Yet the etymology of the name Rus is still far from clear. Recently, Andrii Danylenko reviewed many of the proposed hypotheses and commented that “the variety of solutions suggested by different scholars testifies to an impasse in the etymologizing of this term, a procedure which is chiefly reduced to a multiple

⁷⁵ A. Thulin, ‘The Southern Origin of the Name Rus?: Some Remarks’, in *Les Pays du Nord et Byzance*, pp. 175–83.

⁷⁶ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a’laq an-nafisah*, p. 146.

⁷⁷ P. B. Golden suggested, however, that the word may have entered the Turkic languages from Arabic. Again we lack conclusive evidence.

⁷⁸ This has for instance been suggested and discussed by H. Stang, *The Naming of Russia*, Meddelelser no. 77 (1996), pp. 221–22.

choice decipherment”.⁷⁹ With the seemingly faint evidence of etymology, where it is even problematic to determine whether the name was an exonym or an endonym, we must explore other paths of inquiry.

1.4.2 The Scandinavian Element

There are numerous indications that the early Rus should be interpreted as predominantly transmigrating Scandinavians, although elaborating on this particular issue will not be a central concern in the following chapters. In the light of the attention this identifications has received from scholars, we must nevertheless review and examine briefly the evidence pointing to the early Rus being Scandinavians, that is as originating from or connected in some way with Scandinavia: evidence putting into relief their ‘Scandinavian-ness’, so to speak, as it appears in the Arabic and other sources as well as the presence of Scandinavian elements over a wider area:

- a) The Latin *Annales Bertiniani* for the year 839: Rus accompanying an embassy from Byzantium to the court of Louis the Pious in Ingelheim are identified as *gens sueoni*,⁸⁰ which the Franks localise in eastern Scandinavia.
- b) A Byzantine source from the mid-tenth century, *De administrando Imperio* recounts Old Norse names of Dniepr rapids, referring to a Scandinavian affiliation of the Rus who negotiate them on their way to Byzantium:⁸¹

Old Norse – English – Greek

Sof eigi, ‘Don’t sleep’, Εσσοπιη

Holmfors, ‘Island-waterfall’, Ουλβορσι

⁷⁹A. Danylenko, ‘The name “Rus”’: In Search of a New Dimension’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, no. 52 (2004), 1–32 (p. 31). Danylenko himself favours the solution that Old East Slavonic borrowed the name from a Baltic Finnic form *rotsi, meaning ‘outsiders’, and that it was later applied to the Norsemen as a social nomen (p. 30).

⁸⁰J. L. Nelson, *The Annals of St-Bertin*, p. 44.

⁸¹That is, the presumed underlying Old Norse form. After Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, trans., revised and rewritten by Benedikt S. Benediktz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 9–12. For a more detailed discussion of the forms and their meanings in the respective languages see Cross and Sherbowitz–Wetzor, *The Primary Chronicle*, pp. 41–42.

Gellandi, ‘Roaring’, Γελανδρι
Eyforr, ‘Ever violent’, Αειφορ
Bárufors, ‘Eave-waterfall’, Βαρουφορος
Hlajandi, ‘Laughing (ref. noise of water)’, Λεαντι
Strukan, ‘[At the] rapids’, Στρουκουν

- c) The Old East Slavonic *Primary Chronicle*: The Rus were called in from the north in the ninth century and Old Norse personal names are recorded as Rus names in treaties with Byzantium from 911 and 945. These include Karl, Ingjald, Farulf, Vermund, Hrollaf, Gunnar, Harold, Frithleif, Hroarr, Angantyr and more.⁸²
- d) Continued usage of a few Scandinavian names in Kievan Rus, e.g. Igor (Ingvar), Oleg (Helgi), Ingeborg, Ingigerda, Rogvolod (Rognvald), Rogneda (Ragnheid).⁸³
- e) Arabic writers add to this with Ya‘qubi’s comment (891/892) and later suggestions of Al-Mas‘udi and Ibn Hawqal that the Rus are the same as the *majus* who raided al-Andalus (*majus* was one of the words used for Scandinavians raiding the Iberian Peninsula).⁸⁴

Many more indicators could be mentioned such as those contained in Old Norse written material which often refer to expeditions to the east, and which also contain ‘norsified’ toponyms from the region (such as Hólmgarður < Novgorod/Gorodishche, Ráðstofa < Rostov, Súrðalir < Suzdal’, Palteskja < Polotsk).⁸⁵ Several runic inscriptions in Scandinavia also commemorate journeys to the east and Scandinavian runes have been found in Russia and Ukraine on stones sticks and coins. Numerous archaeological finds over a vast area of modern Russia and Ukraine also show parallels with similar finds in Scandinavia.⁸⁶

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 65.

⁸³ L. Voitovich, *Kniazha doba na Rusi: Portreti Eliti* (Kiev: Vitavets Oleksandr Pshonkivskii, 2006), pp. 382, 384, 460, 244 seq., 285 and 463.

⁸⁴ Ya‘qubi, *Kitab al-buldan*, p. 304. Al-Mas‘udi, *Muruj adb-dhabab*, ed. ‘Abd al-Amir ‘Ali Muhanna (Beirut, 1991), pp. 187–88; Ibn Hawqal, *Kitab surat al-ard*, pp. 386–98.

⁸⁵ For a detailed discussion of these and other toponyms in the Old Norse literature relating to Eastern Europe, see E. Melnikova, *The Eastern World of the Vikings*, pp. 3–18.

⁸⁶ See Ingmar Jansson, ‘Situationen i Norden och Östeuropa för 1000 år sedan – en arkeologs synpunkter på frågan om östkristna inflytanden under missionstiden’, in *Från Bysans til Norden: Östliga kyrkoïnfluenser under vikingatid och tidig medeltid*, ed. by Henrik Janson (Malmö: Artos, 2005), *idem* ‘Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import in Skandinavien’, in *Oldenburg-Wolin-Staraja Ladoga-Novgorod-*

Thus the evidence we can gather from a variety of source material, while certainly not unproblematic, conveys a rather strong connection between the Rus and Scandinavia, even if we dismiss the rather vague contribution of etymology.

At the heart of the argument that Rus were Scandinavian is Ibn Fadlan's account, which we have already mentioned. The unique standing of this text as the only substantial extant eyewitness account of the early Rus makes it, in theory, particularly inviting for examining the cultural orientation of the Rus. Several scholars have postulated that the Rus portrayed by Ibn Fadlan are Scandinavian Vikings and even Odinic at that (see chapter three). Yet, Ibn Fadlan, despite having an ideal opportunity to do so, showed little interest in inquiring as to the provenance of the Rus and he does not, besides what may be inferred from his description, explicitly connect them with Scandinavia. This also applies to other Arabic writers at the time. The few attempts they made at connecting the Rus with a fixed locality appear in the first half of the tenth century, and then predominantly in Khazarian lands and in Bulghar in the mid-Volga region.

Several reasons may account for the lack of wider context for the Rus in the Arabic sources. First of all the writers were apparently not very interested in minutiae of the northern peoples. To them they were of note as a potential source of danger, as well as commodities acquired through trade and, moreover, as a source of valiant soldiers. Culturally, however, they seem to have been regarded as having little to offer.⁸⁷ Secondly, the region in which the early Rus are documented was not geographically well known and we come across many confused notices on their locations, such as Ibn Rustah's account discussed above. The picture the sources provide also suggests that the Rus were highly mobile and scattered across a wide region, something that would only have increased the confusion among the Arabic writers regarding the former's origin or homeland.

Kiev: Handel und Handelsverbindungen im südlichen und östlichen Ostseeraum während des frühen Mittelalters. Sonderdruck aus Bericht der Römisch–Germanischen Kommission 69 (Mainz am Rhein: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1988) and recently F. Androschuk and V. Zotsenka, *Scandinavian Antiquities of Southern Rus': A Catalogue* (Paris: ACHCByz, 2012).

⁸⁷A case in point here is the extremely sparse information we have on the Turkic soldiers in Baghdad and Samarra, even though they lived there for almost a century right under the noses of distinguished scholars and writers and were known to them for a much longer period. Gordon Matthew's *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (AH 200–275/815–889 CE)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001) explores the available data.

1.4.3 Social Structure and Characteristics

Beside the often essentialist pursuit of the supposed origins or provenance of the Rus, there looms the problem of delineating a working definition of their characteristics as a social group as they are portrayed by the Arabic writers. As we have already discussed, there are some fundamental differences in this regard between their depiction in the Old East Slavonic *Primary Chronicle* and the Arabic geographical literature.

As noted, overall there is considerable material in the sources on the Rus combined to conclude that at least parts of the early Rus were Scandinavian or of Scandinavian descent. Yet, given their adaptability or pliability as we know it from other places in this period, such as Normandy and Sicily, and also as is indirectly conveyed to us by the Arabic sources, it is difficult to sustain that the interaction with the cultures of the mid- to lower Volga region over a century and a half left them unaffected. Indeed, it will be argued here, the evidence we possess invites a more nuanced interpretation of their identity than rigid, overarching concepts of ethnicity such as ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Slavic’ allow.

Findings and theories from anthropology and sociology, although usually aimed at synchronic research, may provide us with useful tools for discerning the hazy outlines of peoples and processes in the distant past.⁸⁸ From the mid-twentieth century onwards scholars have increasingly problematized and deconstructed older concepts of ethnicity and identity and critically addressed their limitations. In the 1960s and 70s there emerged a theory of a so-called instrumental or situational identity, which differed from earlier ideas on a so-called primordial ethnicity with its emphasis on biological descent, and continuity of cultural commonalities. Thus the influential Norwegian anthropologist Fredrick Barth challenged the consensus on the traditional definition of ethnic groups and objected that

⁸⁸ This usefulness is discussed, for instance, by Alan Macfarlane, ‘Anthropology and History’, in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Historians*, ed. by J. Cannon et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 12–14.

it begs all the critical questions: while purporting to give an ideal type model of a recurring empirical form, it implies a preconceived view of what are the significant factors in the genesis, structure, and function of such groups. Most critically, it allows us to assume that boundary maintenance is unproblematical and follows from the isolation which the itemised characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers [...] This also limits the range of factors that we use to explain cultural diversity: we are led to imagine each group developing its cultural and social form in relative isolation.⁸⁹

Barth's aim, as he later remarked, was to view "ethnic identity as a feature of social organization, rather than a nebulous expression of culture" and he was, moreover, able to demonstrate that "ethnic groups and their features are produced under particular interactional, historical, economic and political circumstances: they are highly situational, not primordial."⁹⁰

More recently anthropologist Liisa H. Malkki states that "to plot only "places of birth" and degrees of nativeness is to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them".⁹¹ Her study on refugees may offer further analogies that could aid our analysis of the cultural orientation of the Rus as they are portrayed in the Arabic material. Malkki notes that "the most striking social fact about the [refugee] camp was that its inhabitants were continually engaged in an impassioned construction and reconstruction of their history as "a people"" and that the "refugeeness", comparable here to the roving or scattered nature of the Rus in that both states can be regarded as a kind of diaspora⁹², "had a central place in these narrative processes. Far from being a "spoiled identity", refugee

⁸⁹ F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), p. 11.

⁹⁰ F. Barth, 'Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity', in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity*, ed. by H. Vermeulen and C. Govers (Amsterdam: Spinhuis, 1994), pp. 11–32 (p. 12).

⁹¹ L. H. Malkki, 'National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees', in *Culture, Power, Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. by A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 52–74 (p. 72).

⁹² Lesley Abrams has recently discussed the application of the term 'diaspora' to the overseas settlements of the Viking Age and offers a speculative assessment, based on literary, historical, archaeological, sculptural and onomastic evidence, of how the concept might contribute to our understanding of the cultural dynamics of the period. Despite being traditionally almost exclusively employed in the context of Jewish history, Abrams argues that this term is appropriate also in the context of the expansion of Scandinavian peoples in the medieval period. ('Diaspora and Identity in the Viking Age', *Early Medieval Europe*, vol. 20 (2012), 17–38.

status was valued and protected as a sign of the ultimate temporariness of exile.”⁹³ Similarly, as an itinerant community, the Rus would conjure and reconjure up their traditions, reinvent under the influence from local cultures and, in the process, forge a common identity regardless of how ephemeral this identity would prove to be.

Viewing the Arabic evidence on the Rus from the ninth and the early tenth century through this kind of prism may prove fruitful. It can aid us not only in depicting the outlines of the social structure of the early Rus as a historical entity, but also to frame the Arabic writers’ representation of them. This is not least with regard to the question of what were the factors that caused them to perceive of the Rus as a distinct entity and which concepts may be apt to describe it. In some respects Ibn Fadlan’s account, our most detailed yet perplexing source, gains more plausibility when such culturally hybrid and in-flux situation is considered; elements which seem non-reconcilable or contradictory when compared to one particular culture, that is a Scandinavian homeland culture as the case has usually been, become a more acceptable feature of his description when our horizon is expanded with a more flexible, less primordialist, concept of identity. One that is “always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories and so on...a creolized aggregate composed through bricolage.”⁹⁴ That an instrumentalist view on identity will prevail in our analysis does not signify that the Rus did not have any sense of biological origins or inherited traditions. It is above all our data that restricts our vision of this aspect to the effect that we are simply not in a position to elaborate on it. We will revisit such theoretical frameworks later on in discussing the different sources, written and material, at hand.

⁹³ L. H. Malkki, ‘National Geographic’, p. 66.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 71.

1.4.4 Trade as Cultural Contacts?

Most of the reports on the Rus that we find in the Arabic source material are related in one way or another to trade, while a few passages touch on other aspects of their culture such as military activities and ritual. Trade can thus be seen as the primary instigator of contacts between the Rus and the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. The contention made here is that as a result there existed between the Rus and these local peoples what we may term 'cultural contacts' over a prolonged period of time, and that it is possible to detect vestiges of these contacts in the surviving written and material evidence.

The aim of this subsection is to examine a few perspectives from anthropology and social psychology in search of a theoretical framework and vocabulary to address whether and how this 'primary instigator of contacts', trade, may be interpreted and discussed as a form of cultural contacts. A corollary to this main thread is also, and necessarily, a consideration of the general applicability of modern theories and frameworks to information contained in medieval or ancient source material.

1.4.4.1 Exchange, Reciprocity, Acculturation

In the social sciences, trade relationships are not studied solely on the grounds of their economic aspects. Instead the exchanges of goods are placed in "the context of the total system of circulation and distribution of values, both material and symbolic [...] which may include ceremonial valuables, knowledge and expertise, human capital, and so on, which constitutes the economic and social organization of the group". Anthropologists furthermore view trade as one form or modality of exchange among many others, one which is frequently "a vital factor in systems of regional socio-economic integration. As such, trading relations may also be

studied in terms of their historical and evolutionary consequences, as means of the distribution of culture traits across linguistic and ethnic boundaries.”⁹⁵

Examples of this latter phenomenon abound.⁹⁶ An illustrative example is the case of the Ethiopian Gurage people, who travel far and wide selling their own handicraft and spend up to half a year away from home. Anthropologists Aster Akalu and Per Stjernquist have emphasised the great ability of the Gurage to adapt themselves to different situations, for example by accepting different remunerations for their goods such as other goods, services, cattle or coins. With this flexibility, Akalu and Stjernquist maintain, “they have for many years served as links between people of different cultural backgrounds, introducing artefacts and even ideas from one part of the country to another.”⁹⁷

It is commonly accepted that trade may be regarded as a particularly important sphere of human interaction, where not only merchandise and money change hands but also aspects of the cultures of the parties involved. In Philip Curtin’s words, “trade and exchange across cultural lines have played a crucial role in human history, being perhaps the most important external stimuli to change, leaving aside the unmeasurable and less benign influence of military conquest.”⁹⁸ This perspective invites us to look beyond superficially descriptive terms such as ‘exchange’ or ‘reciprocity’, which, although integral to trading relationships, do not encompass the complexity of the interaction involved. While the link between trade and cultural contact is not a tenuous one, what are the processes at large and how can we construe a theoretical basis connecting these two concepts?

In the social sciences, the processes occurring at the junction and interlacing of different cultures are frequently described with the term ‘acculturation’. This process is commonly defined as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with

⁹⁵ C. Seymour-Smith, ‘Trade’, in *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 279.

⁹⁶ For a multitude of historical antecedents on a global scale from antiquity to modern times see P. D. Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁹⁷ A. Akalu and P. Stjernquist, ‘To What Extent are Ethnographic Analogies Useful for the Reconstruction of Prehistoric Exchange?’, in *Trade and Exchange in Prehistory: Studies in Honour of Berta Stjernquist*, ed. by B. Haardh, L. Larsson, D. Olausson and R. Petre (Lund: Historiska Museum, 1988), pp. 5–13 (p. 10).

⁹⁸ Curtin, *Cross Cultural Trade in World History*, p. 1.

subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.”⁹⁹ A framework and theory of acculturation was laid out by John Berry and David Sam primarily from the point of view of social psychology, although it also incorporates other sociological and anthropological perspectives. Their approach advocates the study of the compatibility of cultural values, norms, attitudes and personality between the two cultural communities in contact as a basis for understanding the acculturation process that is set in motion. Furthermore, they emphasise the importance of examining the resulting cultural changes in both groups that emerge during acculturation. The question is whether the acculturation framework can provide a useful platform to discuss trade as a form of cultural contacts.¹⁰⁰

1.4.4.2 Acculturation and Identity

At this junction, it is important to note that whereas modern anthropological and sociological research and fieldwork is able to draw upon vast data to come up with new findings, the medieval historian’s work is very much limited by a more or less fixed set of sources. Moreover, the medieval historian has obviously no opportunity to conduct further ethnographic fieldwork. Thus, the idea put forward here that the application of theories, methods and definitions derived from research in anthropology, sociology and social psychology may elucidate situations and developments in the past requires a universalist approach. This approach assumes commonalities in the mechanics of acculturation where “basic psychological processes are assumed to be species-wide, shared human characteristics.”¹⁰¹ This stance further views the psychological processes underlying any human behaviour as “shaped by cultural factors during the course of

⁹⁹ J. Berry and D. Sam, ‘Acculturation: When Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural Backgrounds Meet’, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* no. 5 (2010), 472–81 (p. 473).

¹⁰⁰ Such an approach is not entirely novel. The ties between trade and acculturation have been studied for example in early contacts between settlers and indigenous peoples in North America. See, for instance: Martin H. Quitt, ‘Trade and Acculturation at Jamestown, 1607–1609: The Limits of Understanding’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, vol. 52, no. 2 (1995), 227–58 and Arthur J. Ray, ‘History and Archaeology of the Northern Fur Trade’, *American Antiquity*, vol. 43, no. 1 (1978), 26–34.

¹⁰¹ *Cross-cultural Psychology: Research and Applications*, eds. J. W. Berry, Y. H. Poortinga, S. E. Breugelmans, A. Chasiotis and D. L. Sam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 133.

development and are further guided by cultural factors during their expression in daily life.”¹⁰²

The acculturation model of John Berry and David Sam consists of four main strands. It is based on the so-called ABCs of acculturation, where the letters respectively refer to affective, behavioural and cognitive aspects of the acculturation process,¹⁰³ with the addition of a D which stands for developmental aspects. In brief summary, the affective perspective (A) emphasises the emotional aspects of acculturation, focusing on issues such as psychological well-being and life satisfaction. The behavioural dimension (B) is centred on interpersonal behaviour and culture learning, while the cognitive perspectives (C) are linked with social identification theories, and the developmental aspect (D) focuses on ontogenetic changes (the development of an individual organism or anatomical or behavioural feature from the earliest stage to maturity) that may occur in the individual during the acculturation process.¹⁰⁴

What, if anything, does this modern framework contribute to further our understanding of a medieval situation? Returning to our particular case, due to the restrictions of the source material we are not in a position to cater for all the areas of analysis proposed in the framework. As for the affective perspective we have neither information on the psychological state or well-being of the Rus in their interaction with the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars, nor of the levels of acculturative stress or social support or other criteria linked to it. As for developmental changes, our sources again yield nothing of value. Strands B (behavioural) and C (cognitive), however, do offer some hope of applicability.

The behavioural perspective is grounded in the hypothesis that “people in cultural transitions may lack the necessary skills needed to engage the new culture resulting in difficulties of adaptation.”¹⁰⁵ That to overcome such difficulties, “individuals are

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ As proposed by C. Ward ‘The A, B, Cs of Acculturation’, in *The Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, ed. by D. Matsumoto (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 411–45 and C. Ward, S. Bochner and A. Furnham, *The Psychology of Culture Shock* (Hove: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁰⁴ J. Berry and D. Sam, ‘Acculturation’, p. 474.

¹⁰⁵ Reviewed by A. M. Masgoret and C. Ward, ‘The Cultural Learning Approach to Acculturation’ in *Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology* ed. by D. Sam and J. Berry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 58–77.

expected to learn or acquire the culture-specific behavioural skills [...] that are necessary to negotiate this new cultural milieu.”¹⁰⁶ Berry and Sam further emphasise the obtention of skills for intercultural communication, including its “verbal and nonverbal components, as well as rules, conventions and norms and their influences on intercultural effectiveness.”¹⁰⁷

In this context, it is tempting to view the material evidence in the form of Khazar symbols incised on coins (see chapter four) as corresponding to the non-verbal intercultural communication of the model, that is as possibly a vestige of the cultural learning necessary for effective communication in their mercantile activities. The second possible linkage here between theory and evidence is ‘intercultural effectiveness’ which may be equated with the effectiveness of trade between the Rus on the one hand and the Khazars and the Bulgars on the other hand. Indeed, the ninth and tenth centuries were a period of intense trade, as witnessed by our written sources as well as the hundreds of thousands of coins unearthed in Eastern Europe, the Baltic and Scandinavia.

Other aspects of the behavioural perspective (B), such as language proficiency may not be applicable to our sources since any information on this aspect is absent from them. It may nevertheless indicate to us that such skills were present given that it is integral to this strand of the acculturation model and considering the common phenomenon of lingua francas that often arise from trade.

The cognitive perspective (C) of the framework emphasises the ways people perceive of themselves and others in the face of intercultural encounters. It is grounded on the social identity theories of Henri Tajfel and Victor Turner and, in the context of acculturation theory, focuses on how groups and individuals define their identity in relation to the members of their own group and the larger society with which they interact.¹⁰⁸ Considering the vast scholarly literature on identity, this perspective invites in turn multiple theoretical approaches.

¹⁰⁶ S. Bochner, ‘Problems in culture learning’ in *Overseas students in Australia* ed. by S. Bochner and P. Wicks (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1972), pp. 65–81 (after J. Berry and D. Sam, ‘Acculturation’, pp. 475 and 480.)

¹⁰⁷ J. Berry and D. Sam, ‘Acculturation’, p. 475.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

One such path is identity theory (IT) as advanced and developed by sociologists Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, which presents an interpretation of identity that may be applied to our information on the Rus. It is in particular the approach of Stryker, based on his earlier writings on structural symbolic interactionism that appears suitable for our purposes. The emphasis of Stryker's IT was on examining how social structures affect the structure of self and how structure of self influences social behaviour. One of the many components of IT is the idea of identity salience which is defined as the

probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation. Borrowing from cognitive social psychology (Markus 1977), theorists understand identities as cognitive schemas – internally stored information and meanings serving as frameworks for interpreting experience. As such, they are cognitive bases for defining situations, and they increase sensitivity and receptivity to certain cues for behaviour. With self thus specified, identity theorists hypothesized that the higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the greater the probability of behavioural choices in accord with the expectations attached to that identity.¹⁰⁹

For example, the salience of religious identities predicts time spent in religious activities, and is predicted by the commitment to role relationships based on religion.¹¹⁰

Further investigations within the social sciences have explored how identities produce behaviours which express said identities. According to the traditional symbolic interactionist ideas that identities are self-meanings and that self-meanings develop in the context of meanings of roles and counter roles, Burke and Donald Reitzes further argued that the link between identity and behaviour consisted of the meanings they shared and that identities predicted behaviour only when the meaning of the identity corresponded to the meaning of the behaviour.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ S. Stryker and P. Burke, 'The Past, Present and Future of an Identity Theory', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 63, no 4 (2000), 284–97 (p. 286).

¹¹⁰ S. Stryker and R. T. Serpe 'Commitment, Identity Salience, and Role Behavior: A Theory and Research Example', in *Personality, Roles, and Social Behavior*, ed. by W. Ickes and E. S. Knowles (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982), pp. 199–218.

¹¹¹ P. J. Burke and D. C. Reitzes, 'The Link Between Identity and Role Performance', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 2 (1981), 83–92.

In short, IT offers tools to analyse both the external and internal processes involved in the shaping of an identity. In addition to these elements, it has been established that the manipulation of symbols and resources in order to obtain goals is an important function of identities. Furthermore, that by way of this process “identities create value and by creating value, identities can both increase the level of commitment to groups that underlie the identities and increase their salience – that is, the likelihood that these identities will be activated in other situations.”¹¹²

Returning to Sam and Berry’s framework of acculturation, its cognitive perspective (C) may be applicable to the information we possess on the ritual practices of the Rus as documented by Ibn Fadlan in 922. Besides the Scandinavian characteristics that are usually highlighted, an alternative interpretation of the funerary ritual offered here in chapter three, suggests that it contains several aspects which are attributable to the influence of the local peoples living in the Volga-Caspian region.

If such an interpretation is tenable, the ritual may be regarded, aside from its specific religious or theological nature, as a means of maintaining and necessarily redefining Rus identity in response to their role in the milieu in which they subsisted. In contrast to the material evidence which we mentioned in conjunction with the behavioural perspective (B) of the acculturation model, Ibn Fadlan’s account provides an insight into a more subtle and private sphere of their culture, one which was probably influenced by decades of contact with the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars primarily through trade and its concomitant cultural interactions.

Finally, in order to provide further insights into the specific ways individuals and groups acculturate, Berry and Sam identified two main factors: a) the degree to which people wish to maintain their heritage cultures and identities, and b) the degree to which people wish to have contact with those who are outside their group and participate with them in the daily life of the larger society. These factors are then linked with four types of acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization, which are descriptive of the balance between the

¹¹² L. Freese and P. J. Burke, ‘Persons, Identities, and Social Interaction’, *Advances in Group Processes*, vol. 11 (1994) 1–24.

two issues of culture maintenance and contact. Thus, the assimilation strategy is used when little emphasis is placed on maintaining one's cultural identity and close interaction with other cultures is preferred, such as the adoption of cultural values, norms and traditions. In contrast, separation strategy indicates a high emphasis on the retention of the original culture and the avoidance of contact with other cultures. Integration strategy refers to a middle way where there is interest in maintaining one's original culture while interacting closely with other groups. That is, where some cultural integrity is maintained, while at the same time the individual seeks, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network. Finally, the marginalization strategy indicates little cultural maintenance, often enforced, and limited relations with others due to exclusion or discrimination.¹¹³

Again the sources for our example are scarce, but the evidence we have points to the Rus being somewhere between assimilation and integration. For instance, the Rus' readiness to incorporate other cultural elements into their own rituals suggests that they should be understood as functioning according to these two types of strategies. Yet these terms may also be somewhat of an overstatement in the case of the Rus as they are described in the Arabic sources because the relationship between the Rus and the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars was probably of a transient character (notwithstanding its duration over decades) as it rested mainly on trade where goods were sourced far afield and exchange was seasonal, depending on the navigability of rivers. This brings us back to the discussion aired above on 'instrumental' or 'situational' ethnicity and the need in this context of this terminology as opposed to the more traditional, and now increasingly abandoned, primordialist approach to ethnicity.

¹¹³ J. Berry and D. Sam, 'Acculturation', pp. 476–77.

1.5 Structure and Objectives

Summing up, at the beginning of this introductory chapter the traditional historiographical narrative of the early Rus was discussed and questioned as to its resistance to take full account of the Arabic sources, which constitute by far the most voluminous written material for that period. Questions were also raised regarding the resistance to take fuller account of the local cultural context in which the Rus are reported to be active. The most important source for this context is Ibn Fadlan's report on the middle Volga but there are also many other Arabic writers who report them as subsisting in Khazarian lands and in the service of the Khazar kaghanal house. Instead, the traditional view is based mostly on the evidence of the Slavonic *Primary Chronicle* which was compiled in Kiev in the twelfth century. In general the subject has been burdened by a strong dichotomy of ethnic nomenclature such as 'Scandinavian' and 'Slavic', allowing little or no space for the influence of other cultures such as the Turkic Khazars and Volga Bulgars.

In this chapter we have also introduced theoretical approaches from the social sciences in order to construct a conceptual framework applicable to our evidence. The purpose of this is mainly twofold. First, to examine viable definitions of ethnicity and identity for our descriptions of the Rus in the Arabic sources, and secondly to define cultural contacts as they are presented to us in this material. Moreover, we introduced definitions and theories that consider trade not only as a means of economic transaction, but also as a sphere of cultural interaction. A further analysis of the processes involved was then laid out via a framework of acculturation where its nodal points with our source material were highlighted.

Departing from this premise, the aim of the following chapters is broadly twofold. The first goal is to examine and analyse the Arabic geographical and historical literature of the ninth and tenth century with regard to the cultural milieu in which the early Rus are reported. This task requires first of all a scrutiny of the circumstances in which these sources were composed, the traditions upon which they drew and their interrelation, as well as the extent of geographical and

cultural knowledge of its authors, and ways of transmission of such material. It will be argued that this source material invites a further qualification of the cultural orientation or affiliation of the Rus than has hitherto been ventured. If the Rus did originate from Scandinavia, as is widely agreed, then by the time the Arabic writers are most occupied with them (in the first half of the tenth century) it seems that the former had been influenced by and adapted to some degree to the customs and traditions of local peoples of the region where they are documented. These local peoples would primarily be the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. In chapter two we will collect the passages in the Arabic written sources dealing in one way or another with this context while in chapter three the account of Ibn Fadlan will be examined in more depth with the objective of putting into relief the effects of the aforementioned cultural contacts and their impact on Rus identity. The dedication of a whole chapter to this work is not only due to its volume but also the complexity and multifariousness of the account. This also reflects the variety of interpretations it has generated regarding the ethnicity and culture of the Rus. It also stands out in comparison with the other material by being the only eyewitness description at our disposal while it also provides information on physical appearance, attire and everyday customs with a considerable degree of detail. Furthermore it is the fullest text on the Rus that has survived from this period, and it has received more attention from scholars than any other Arabic text on the Rus, which allows for further engagement in our interpretation.

Our second goal is to examine archaeological and numismatic material that may yield further evidence of the cultural contacts conveyed by the narrative sources. In the area where Rus are believed to have been active numerous artefacts related to the Turkic and Islamic world, as well as Scandinavian, finds have been unearthed. Particularly interesting for our context are several items of mixed style, relics of cultural hybridity with which the Rus may be connected. Particularly important also in this context are the Arabic silver dirham coins, the main form of payment the Rus received for their merchandise, and which flowed in vast amounts in a north and north-westerly direction from the Caliphate where they were originally minted. The approximately half a million pieces found mainly in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic and Sweden, speak for the intensity of the

Rus' oriental connection. Much has been written on the nature and consequences of this economic system but here we shall also examine a more specific aspect of these coins, namely their display of various incisions or graffiti, which may be interpreted as markers of cross-cultural contacts. Especially important for our study, are symbols that may be qualified as spiritual or religious, as well as a few inscribed words. The archaeological and numismatic evidence combined will be the subject of chapter four.

Finally, the fifth and final chapter will focus on three specific issues. By comparing the various source material we will address the problem of reports on the Rus, even synchronous ones, over an immense area. Further, we will sum up our argument for approaching the Rus in the Arabic sources as distinct from their portrayal elsewhere. Secondly, the issue of a Rus kaghanate will be addressed and, finally, we will briefly look into possible vestiges of the cultural contacts between the Rus and the Turkic and Islamic worlds in Old Scandinavian language and literature.

Chapter 2

Arabic Sources on the Rus

2.0 Introduction

It is difficult to ascertain with any precision the correlation between the physical movements of the Rus into the Caliphate's sphere of interest and their appearance in the writings of its historians and geographers. Our first reports of the Rus originate in all likelihood from shortly before the mid-ninth century, whereas the vast majority of these belong to the first half of the tenth century. From this period alone we possess numerous shorter and longer notices conveying various information on their whereabouts and activity. This chapter surveys this source material primarily with a view to the Muslim writers' perception of the location of the Rus and the cultural context in which they appear. An attempt will be made to establish the earliest Arabic report on the Rus, as well as to address problematic issues relating to their distinctiveness and impact, that is how and why the Rus caught, and retained for some time, the interest of these writers.

It should be noted that the following survey of the Arabic sources on the Rus is by no means exhaustive. The aim in this chapter is above all to identify the most salient ideas that the Arabic geographers and historians in the ninth and the tenth century had of the Rus, as this comes across in their works. At the end of this chapter, a chronology and an overview of the main 'strands' of Arabic accounts of the Rus will be presented that will also serve as material for comparison with the chronology of the archaeological and numismatic evidence discussed in chapter four. First, however, it is necessary to look closer at the wider

background of the Arabic material, the emergence of Muslim geography, and the Caliphate's view of the north, in addition to the historical context that brought about the incorporation of the Rus in it.

2.1 Islamic Geography

The development of Islamic geography can, as so many other cultural achievements of the early centuries of Islam, ultimately be ascribed to the ascent of the Abbasids in the mid-eighth century.¹ From then on, Persian cultural and scientific heritage, with considerable admixture of Greek and Indian traditions, played an important role in the shaping of Muslim scholarship. Under Umayyad rule (661–750) people of non-Arab background had generally not enjoyed the same rights and privileges as the Arabs. But when the Abbasids came to power in the mid-eighth century, they benefitted from the support of the many Persian subjects of the Caliphate who had previously been discriminated against under Umayyad rule. This change of regime allowed peoples of non-Arab background to gain prominence and even acquire high positions within the caliphal court. Indeed a number of our sources are the work of Arabic-writing scholars of Persian descent and even the so-called House of Wisdom² (*Ar. Bayt al-bikmah*) in Baghdad, which contained an important library and facilities for scholarly

¹ For a thorough discussion of the formative period of Islamic geography and cartography see A. T. Karamustafa, 'Introduction to Islamic Maps', in *The History of Cartography: Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, ed. by J. B. Harley and D. Woodward (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 3–11. In the same volume: G. R. Tibbets, 'Early Geographical Mapping', pp. 90–107; *Idem*, 'The Balkhi School of Geographers', pp. 108–36. Also F. Taeschner, 'Djughrafiya', *EI2*, pp. 575–90; A. Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle: Géographie et géographie humaine dans la littérature arabe des origines à 1050* (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1967); P. Heck, *The Construction of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization: Qudama b. Ja'far and his Kitab wa-sina'at al-kitaba*, *Islamic History and Civilization*, vol. 42 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 94–145; *General Outlines of Islamic Geography*, ed. by Fuat Sezgin, in collaboration with Mazen Amawi, Carl Ehrig-Eggert and Eckhard Neubauer, Veröffentlichungen (Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. Institut für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften). Reihe B, Nachdrucke. Abteilung Geographie, vol. 28 (Frankfurt: The Institute, 1992).

² D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries)* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1, 53–60; D. Sourdel, 'Bayt al-Hikma', *EI2*, p. 1141.

undertakings, was apparently inspired by the great academy and library at Gundeshapur (in modern western Iran).³

Of great importance for Islamic scholarship were the Caliphate's long-standing contacts with Byzantium, where many classical works had survived. Exchange of information and ideas had already taken place under the Umayyad regime but became particularly dynamic under the Abbasids. In the second half of the eighth century there emerged an enormously productive intellectual movement which was especially patronised by the Caliph Harun ar-Rashid (786–809) and his son and successor Al-Ma'mun (813–833). This resulted in the composition of numerous important and influential works on philosophy, medicine, astronomy, geography and many other branches of science. A particularly significant impetus for this movement were translations of Greek works from Hellenistic and Roman times. A considerable number of scholars and translators emerged and the extent of material translated was immense. This development, often referred to in modern scholarship as simply the Translation Movement, lasted for well over two centuries during which nearly all “non-literary and non-historical secular Greek books that were available throughout the Eastern Byzantine Empire and the Near East were translated into Arabic”.⁴

It was from this fertile ground of scholarship that Islamic geography emerged, although early on it did not quite correspond to what the modern term conveys. Thus it was not a well-defined and delimited field of science with a specific connotation and subject matter. In its formative period (ninth and tenth centuries) we see the merging of several genres, such as geodesy, surveys of postal routes, itineraries, and travelogues, which contributed to the emerging science of geography. Ptolemy's *Geographia* from the second century AD was influential although it has not been established whether it was ever translated in its entirety

³ D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, pp. 135–36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1. On Byzantine-Muslim relations and their impact on scholarship see H. Kennedy, 'Byzantine-Arab Diplomacy in the Near East from the Islamic Conquests to the Mid Eleventh Century', in *Byzantine Diplomacy*, ed. by J. Shepard and S. Franklin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1992), pp. 133–43; S. M. Ahmad, *A History of Arab-Islamic Geography (9th – 16th Century AD)* (Mafraq: Al Ahl-Bayt University, 1995), pp. 5–17; J. Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 78–99; D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, pp. 1–8 and 185–86.

into Arabic.⁵ Several adaptations of this work were made, however, the most important of which was that of Muhammad b. Musa al-Khwarazmi (b. 780?, fl. 820–847, d. shortly after 847) who incorporated additional information probably from his own lifetime. The title was translated as *Surat al-Ard*, or ‘the image of the earth’. This, and other headings of important early works, equally descriptive of their practical purpose, subsequently became generic terms for particular categories of works such as *Kitab al-Masalik wa-l-Mamalik* (Book of/Treatise on Routes and Kingdoms) and *Kitab al-Buldan* (Book of the Lands). There would thus be several works under each heading or category but the Arabic term *djughrafīyya* (i.e. geography) in the modern sense only came into use at a later date.⁶

The impact of foreign, that is non-Arabic, ideas on the budding Islamic geography can further be evidenced with the adoption of the *zīj*, astronomical tables deriving from India, and the Persian *kešvar* system of seven geographical regions which in turn may have had its origins in Babylonian sources or Indian cosmography.⁷ Greek geography, however, seems to have had the most significant or detectable impact on the early Islamic geographers and the idea of *klimata* (whence Arab. *iqlim* pl. *aqalim* is borrowed), which divides the known world into areas between latitudinal lines, caught on. That said, the question of influences remains complicated not least due to the long-lasting impact of Hellenism in both Persia and India.

In the course of the ninth and tenth centuries two different approaches to geographical method can be distinguished among Arabic writers. A distinctive feature of the so-called *Iraqi* school, the best known exponents of which are Ibn Khurradadhbih, Al-Ya‘qubi and Al-Mas‘udi, is the placement of Iraq in a central position in Arab regional and descriptive geography. The geographers who followed the ideology of this tradition treated the world as a whole while dealing in more detail with the lands of the Caliphate. This is the main contrast vis à vis

⁵ D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, p. 184. J. F. P. Hopkins, ‘Geographical and Navigational Literature’, in *Religion, Learning and Science in the ‘Abbasid Period* (*Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*), ed. by M. J. L. Young, J. D. Latham and R. B. Serjeant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 301–27 (p. 303). Syriac translations of Ptolemy may also have been intermediary between the Greek original and the Arabic.

⁶ F. Taeschner, ‘Djughrafīya’, *EI2*, p. 575.

⁷ On foreign influence on the beginnings of Islamic cartography see L. Bagrow and R. A. Skelton, *History of Cartography* (London: C. A. Watts, 1964), pp. 90–95; J. Hopkins, ‘Geographical and Navigational Literature’, pp. 302–08.

the so-called *Balkhi* school, consisting of the tenth-century works of Al-Istakhri, Ibn Hawqal and Al-Muqaddasi, which are purportedly based on a series of twenty maps from a treatise by Ahmad ibn Sahl al-Balkhi (850-934) which is no longer extant.⁸ A common trait of all these authors is that they centred their efforts on the world of Islam and while hardly touching on other regions except those bordering on the Caliphate. Muqaddasi is sometimes thought to represent the climax of classical Muslim geography, a nodal point, in the view of André Miquel, where all the strands of geographical writing come together, only to part again into diverse strands. According to Miquel, up to that time geography had been political and mathematical on one hand and literary and anecdotal on the other, and that thereafter it took the shape of dictionaries, encyclopedias and travellers' accounts.⁹ However useful in expressing a general change of emphases and trends in Muslim geography, such a broad generalization is necessarily inaccurate. We have examples of travel literature well before al-Muqaddasi, such as the account of Sallam the Interpreter preserved in the *Kitab al-Mamalik wa 'l-Masalik* of Ibn Khurradadhbih from the mid-ninth century and the Account of Ibn Fadlan from the early tenth century. Nor can it be said that geography after al-Muqaddasi ceased to be mathematical and political for such aspects were usually an intrinsic part of geography in general.

The particular contexts in which the geographers and historians composed their works also came to differ widely since not only was the Caliphate physically vast, it also encompassed a vast variety of cultures and traditions. This becomes apparent when we examine the individual circumstances in which each of these authors wrote their works, their particular ideological and political environment as well as the education they received. Moreover it is important to establish with whom these authors associated, what sources they may have consulted and whether or to what extent they adhered to the principles of *adab*, to name a few significant factors.¹⁰ Biographical material, where the sources permit, therefore

⁸ D. M. Dunlop, 'Al-Balkhi', *EI2*, p. 1003.

⁹ "S'il est permis de schématiser, on peut dire q'avant elle la géographie est politique et mathématique, d'une part, littéraire et anecdotique de l'autre; après elle, elle évolue vers le dictionnaire, l'encyclopédie scientifique ou le récit de voyages". See further A. Miquel's detailed discussion of Muqaddasi's work in *La Géographie Humaine du Monde Musulman*, vol. I, pp. 313–30.

¹⁰ In Arabic, the term *adab* has many different meanings. It may be used to translate the word 'literature', but can also serve to convey a particular way of writing which in our period was mainly intended to edify and entertain although with time the concept and its scope have been much

becomes an important additional source for our interpretation of the passages since it may have a bearing upon their subject matter and its presentation.

2.1.1 The View of the North

As the classical geographers many centuries earlier, from whom many notions were borrowed, the Muslim geographers developed their own view of the regions to the north. Similarly to their Greek counterparts their descriptions are sometimes interspersed with exaggerations, stereotypes, and misnomers as well as anachronistic information. The inhabitants of these regions, with few exceptions, were above all thought to be devoid of refined culture and represent antithesis to civilization. These people were not only geographically but also culturally distant from Islam, its cities and its traditions, and to boot a large part of them were pagans. The passages concerning the Rus that have come down to us are placed within texts that are created in accordance with a world-view where the central Islamic lands, specifically Mekka and Baghdad, are at the centre and *Yajuj wa Majuj* (Gog and Magog) or some other textual expression of ultimate barbarity is at the very margin. The information provided by these sources on the Rus are not a part of any ordinary or rational descriptive geography; rather, they form a part of an expression of a particular world view, a particular politico-economical situation and of particular cultural differences. And these, along with numerous other 'entries' belonging to the northern lands, sometimes serve to highlight the differences and contrasts between the cultured Islamic world and the uncultured peoples outside it.¹¹ In addition to the broad division of approaches in geographical method delineated above, it is thus necessary to briefly consider our sources also with regard to the ideological and epistemological contexts from which they emerge.

problematized and debated. Recently: *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. by P. F. Kennedy, Studies in Arabic language and literature, vol. 6 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005).

¹¹ For an historical overview of the Muslim perception of 'barbarians' and the 'other' in general see U. Haarmann, 'Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the Abbasids to Modern Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1988), 175–96; and A. Al-Azmeh, 'Barbarians in Arab Eyes', *Past and Present*, no. 134 (1992), 3–18.

A central concept of many Muslim geographers' approach to dividing the known world is that of *climes*, which depicted it as consisting of seven latitudinal zones extending from just north of the equator to the farthest regions to the north. The differences in environment of these zones determined through the notions of humoral medicine the different qualities and temperament of their inhabitants. In the temperate middle climes, especially the third and fourth comprising the central Muslim lands, conditions were optimal and produced a harmonious and balanced temperament. To the north and south the respective excessive cold or heat led to distemper that was proportional to their distance from the central climes. At the two extremes life was hardly possible at all, where the inhabitants were removed from norms of humanity in their ugliness and animalistic behaviour. The idea even surfaced that the flora and fauna of the north and south were white and black respectively and that in contrast to the blackness of the inhabitants of the southernmost clime their counterparts in the north showed a tendency towards albinism.¹² Similar notions are also found with classical writers such as Herodotus who placed his own lands in an ideal spot between the extremities of Egypt in the south and Scythia to the north.¹³ The Muslim writers adopted to some extent this view from ancient authorities, but in their own age of Muslim exploration and expansion they were certainly faced with a plethora of new and different entities that contributed to, and required, their own particular representation of peoples outside the realm of Islam.¹⁴

Yet, an important aspect of this, which can be termed a systematic othering of distant peoples, is its potential for overlap. This means that characteristics belonging to one clime could, given certain conditions, be applied to another. In this way the Ethiopians, otherwise firmly relegated to a near-uninhabitable zone,

¹² A. Al-Azmeh, 'Barbarians in Arab Eyes', p. 7–8. These notions are found with Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi, *Relation de Voyages*, p. 131; and Ibn Sa'id *Kitab al-Jughrafiya*, pp. 166 and 177.

¹³ F. Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote: essai sur la représentation de l'autre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), pp. 35–36 and 237–44.

¹⁴ Not all the Muslim geographers employed the system of climes. Some adhered to the Persian *kishwar* arrangement of the known world into concentric circles, or the quadripartite division of the world. Emily Savage-Smith also points out the political incentive behind map-making to define the lands of Islam and impose order and authority over regions under Islamic administration (E. Savage-Smith, 'Memory and Maps', in *Culture and Memory in Early and Medieval Islam: A Festschrift in honour of Wilferd Madelung*, ed. by F. Daftary and J. Meri (London: I.B. Taurus, 2003), pp. 109–27 (p. 117). Nevertheless, the notions here outlined with regard to the system of climes permeate in general the Muslims' descriptions and view of distant peoples. For the many different approaches cf. A. Miquel, *La Géographie Humaine du Monde Musulman*, vol. I, pp. 31–70.

were held in high regard because they had a territorial state and government, and not least because they provided guards who served at the caliphal court in Baghdad. In contrast, the Turkic Khotan people were depicted as cannibals despite being organized under the auspices of a royal dynasty. Aziz Al-Azmeh infers that these exceptions to the system, as well as its blatant inherent contradictions, underline “power relationships which underpinned ethnological types locally in Muslim domains and at large in a world organized by and for these domains.”¹⁵ In other words, the nature of the relationship between the entity described and the Caliphate could have a bearing on how it was perceived and represented by the geographers.

Another problem accompanying the analysis of our material is the assessment of the writers’ actual geographical knowledge of the northern regions. One indication towards such an assessment may lie in their attempts at measurement with geodesic calculation of certain important landmarks such as seas and mountains. It seems, on the whole, that while the Muslim lands were quite well known, the picture gradually becomes hazier the further north we move, although still with important exceptions. The regions immediately adjacent to the Caliphate, the southern Caucasus, Armenia and Georgia, and a narrow stretch along the western coastline of the Caspian Sea up to Bab al-Abwab (modern Derbend) were accessible and even under the Caliphate’s control such as the Emirate of Tiflis (736-1080).

Then, after the intermittent strife with the Khazars had subsided, the inroads made by trade and diplomacy facilitated surveys and descriptions of the lands north of the Caucasus. Yet how far north these reports remain reliable is difficult to establish. In general it seems that geographical knowledge did not accumulate exponentially, and steps were taken both forwards and backwards in this respect. Thus Al-Mas’udi writing in the mid-tenth century accurately refuted Ibn Khurradadhbih’s claim, as well as that of some travellers, that the Azov Sea (Arab. *Bahr al-Mayutis*) and the Caspian Sea (*Bahr al-Khazar*) were connected.¹⁶ He furthermore provides a fairly accurate description the route from the strait of

¹⁵ A. Al-Azmeh, ‘Barbarians in Arab Eyes’, pp. 11–12. The examples cited are taken from Ibn Sa’id’s *Jughrafiya*, p. 97, and the anonymous *Hudud al-Alam*, pp. 85–86 and 99–100.

¹⁶ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-Masalik wa ’l-Mamalik*, p. 103.

Kerch into the Azov, up the Don and on to the Volga via portage. At the same time Al-Mas'udi erroneously reckons that the Don has its origins in a great (unnamed) lake in the north,¹⁷ and believes the Azov Sea is greater in extent and deeper than the Black Sea (*Babr Nitash/al-Buntus*) and he further speculates on a direct connection between the latter and the Atlantic (*Babr Mubii*).¹⁸ Al-Mas'udi was able to provide an estimate of the length of the Caspian Sea that was not too far off (800 miles, modern measurement 640 miles) yet greatly exaggerates its breadth (600 miles, modern measurement 270 miles). This is curious because of the two we would expect the breadth, for example between the two important ports of Bab al-Abwab and Jurjan, to be better known than points of measurement on the distant northern coastline. Yet, even though the Caspian Sea was a major landmark, its exploration developed slowly due to many factors, of which the most important was perhaps that the commercial routes on either side of the lake were well established so that maritime trade or the need for detailed knowledge of it was not necessarily required.¹⁹

It is of course impossible to sufficiently map out the geographical knowledge of the Muslim writers in the ninth and tenth centuries with a few examples like these. On the whole it seems that all kinds of information on cultural and physical geography accumulated, yet with varying consistency and coherence from one work to another, and even within one and the same work. Two important factors, however, may be discerned in the propagation of information on the north to Muslim scholars in the south: the relatively peaceful relations and the ensuing trade between the Khazars and the Caliphate from the late eighth century on the one hand, and the establishment of the lively trade on the route between the Samanids in northern Iran to the Bulgars on the Volga in the late ninth century on the other hand. Additionally, material was obtained from Byzantium through diplomacy and intellectual exchange, and there was an increasing need for the expanding Caliphate to know the geography of its main

¹⁷ Al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, vol. 1, p. 261. He does not seem to be following Ptolemy here, who has that both the Volga (Gr. *Rba*) and the Don (*Tanais*) had their origins in the Hyperborean mountains in the north (*Claudius Ptolemy: The Geography*, transl. and ed. by E. L. Stevenson (New York: Dover, 1991), p. 120).

¹⁸ Al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, vol. 1, p. 273.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of the Caspian Sea in antiquity and medieval times see X. Planhol, 'Caspian Sea', in *EI*, pp. 48–61. Planhol notes the lacunae in the geographers' knowledge of this lake as reflected by the extraordinary variety of names attributed to it, a total of thirty-seven (*Ibid.* p. 52).

rival.²⁰ In a larger timeframe we can speak of a ‘window’ of exploration more or less coeval with the emergence and formative period of Muslim geography that opened during the relatively peaceful co-existence of the Caliphate with the Khazars in the late eighth century and closed again with ascendancy of more hostile peoples that replaced them at the end of the tenth century.²¹

If for the present purpose we attempt to draw a rough sketch of how the Muslim geographers envisaged the lands north of the Caliphate it may have corresponded more or less to a large part of the south and east of the Khazar kaghanate, the coastline up to Bab al-Abwab and then the corridor east of the Caspian Sea from Khurasan through the Ust Yurt to the Bulgars on the Volga (see fig. 1).

Yet far from all of this vast region was known or documented. Rather there were certain groups of peoples, places and routes and some prominent physical features, mainly the Caspian Sea, Volga and Don, that seem to have conditioned the Muslim geographical perception of the north. The busy trade route from Khurasan to Bulghar was relatively well known as indeed is evidenced by Ibn Fadlan who provides plenty of toponyms, especially for rivers that needed to be crossed.²² Several Khazarian cities were also frequently documented such as Atil, Khazaran and Khamlij, although in such cases the orthography was not always consistent. At any rate, it seems improbable that the early Muslim geographers had any clear notions of regions north of Bulghar and even the regions immediately west of the Don seem to have been little known for most of the early period, apart that is from the Khazar and Byzantine towns on the northern coast of the Black Sea. It is first with the appearance of Al-Istakhri’s work around the mid-tenth century that we come across the name *Kiyabab*, which presumably refers to Kiev. Possibly this was a rendition of the Greek *Kioba*, indicating that this new information was perhaps not the result of Muslim geographical investigation but was rather borrowed from the Byzantines who by that time had already been in contact with the Kievan Rus as evidenced by a treaty between the

²⁰ A. Miquel, *La Géographie Humaine du Monde Musulman*, vol. II, p. 145. See our discussion on the Translation Movement earlier in this chapter.

²¹ On the post-Khazar situation in the region see P. B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, pp. 243–44.

²² See map in R. N. Frye, *Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveller from Baghdad to the Volga River* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2005), p. 12.

two from 911.²³ Although the provenance of such individual items may be difficult to track, the evidence of contact allowing for exchange of such information between the two is plentiful. Aside from the voluminous and dynamic exchange resulting from the Translation Movement as well as diplomatic contacts, information may also have been obtained from prisoners and fugitives on both sides.²⁴

Finally, it is important to note that despite a certain degree of vagueness and inaccuracy which often accompany these geographical descriptions of the northern lands, the Muslims had a special incentive to be factual about developments in the north and especially along the northern frontier. This may be explained at least in part by their often-hostile relations with the Khazars, which we briefly discussed in chapter one, as well as their connections with various prominent trading companies that were for whatever reason important to the Muslims.

2.2 Earliest Reports on the Rus

The numerous references to the Rus (Arabic *ar-Rus* or *ar-Rusīyyah* even-handedly) in the Muslim literature over some five or six centuries between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries are usually included in geographical descriptions on peoples living or travelling in a peripheral territory in the north and north-west of the Caucasus such as the Khazars, Volga Bulgars, Burtas, Saqalibah, Magyars, Pechenegs and others. In addition to the writers' own direct observations and borrowing of information from both predecessors and contemporary scholars a very important source of notices, as mentioned, were the accounts that accumulated in connection with travelling merchants. This is because many trade routes connected the Islamic lands with the north on both sides of the Caspian Sea. A well-known example of such a venture is that of Ibn Fadlan who travelled in 921 with a large caravan from Baghdad to Volga Bulgaria in the mid-Volga

²³ Al-Istakhri, *K. Al-masalik al-mamalik*, p. 226. On the treaties between Byzantium and Kievan Rus see our discussion in chapter one.

²⁴ A. Miquel, *La Géographie Humaine du Monde Musulman*, vol. II, pp. 383–87 and fns. 1 and 2.

region about which he left a rich travelogue. Much information would also have circulated via the highly advanced and efficient postal system (*barid*) as well as spies in service of the caliphal administration.²⁵ Most of the passages on the Rus that have come down to us seem to originate in the ninth and tenth centuries whereas later references are usually repetitions, sometimes verbatim or modified to a varying degree.

Before we proceed to discuss the earliest attestation of the Rus in the Arabic sources, we must address one of the earliest mentions of them which can be found in the Frankish *Annals of St Bertin* for the year 839, where they are reported to arrive at the court of Louis the Pious at Ingelheim on the Rhine with an embassy from Byzantium. It touches on our subject in three different aspects: its dating, which is very close to the earliest occurrence of this name in the Arabic literature, the mention of a *kaghan* which may possibly be interpreted as another evidence connecting the Rus with the Turkic peoples, and finally the indirect indications of the passage that they were at that time known in Byzantium.

It is noteworthy that this Latin text has a form '*Rhos*', which is identical to the Greek form as is attested in later Byzantine sources such as the sermons of patriarch Photios from around 860 and Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Administrando Imperio* from the mid-tenth century.²⁶ Another intriguing element here is the identification of their king with what appears to be *kaghan*, although the interpretation of the annalist's *cbacanus* has been contested (see chapter one, p. 10, fn. 30). The fact that these *Rhos* journeyed with the embassy dispatched by the Emperor himself from Constantinople suggests that by 839 they were already known in Byzantium. Another possible relevant in this context is a *Rhos* attack on Paphlagonia on the southern coast of Asia Minor documented in the *Life of St George of Amastris* and attributed by some scholars to the first half of the ninth century although some have postulated that it is a later insertion.²⁷ It is perhaps

²⁵ Cf. A. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 90–140 and 191–92.

²⁶ J. Shepard has suggested that the initial 'rh' is a transliteration of the Greek letter 'rho', and that the form *Rhos* is in fact rendered from the written word rather than the spoken, that is from Theophilus' letter (J. Shepard, 'The Rhos Guests of Louis the Pious: Whence and Wherefore?', *Early Medieval Europe*, no. 4 (1995), 41–60 (pp. 44–45)).

²⁷ *The Life of St George of Amastris*, ed. by V. Vasil'evskij, *Russko-vizantijskie issledovanija*, vol. 2 (St Petersburg, 1893), pp. 1–73. Transl. by David Jenkins, Stefanos Alexopoulos, David Bachrach,

somewhat surprising then that the earliest Greek mention of the *Rhos* is found in the sermons of patriarch Photios', prompted by their attack on Constantinople in 860, which in our particular context is rather late.²⁸ Considering that they formed a part of an embassy that was dispatched from there 20 years earlier, Photios' account should arguably not be seen as the moment in time when the Byzantines were first acquainted with the *Rhos*. In fact, Ibn Khurradadhbih's earlier report on the Rus from around the mid-ninth century, which we will examine below, mentions that the Rus sail to Byzantium with their merchandise (Arab. *Rum*) and pay tithes there.²⁹

2.2.1 Ibn Khurradadhbih and Al-Khwarizmi's 'Mountain of Rus'

As regards their earliest mention of the Rus in the Arabic sources, there are two works that have been dated prior to the mid-ninth century. The first Arabic text to mention the Rus is generally considered to be the *Kitab Al-Masalik wa 'l-Mamalik* (or the *Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms*, dated to the 840s³⁰), composed by Ibn Khurradadhbih who was one of the pioneers of early Muslim geography. In short, he writes that the Rus come from among the *Saqalibah* (we shall examine this name more closely further on), sail down the river Don and pass through Khazaria in order to enter the Caspian Sea. On the way they sometimes land their ships in Jurjan and transport their merchandise on camel-back to Baghdad. Ibn Khurradadhbih also relates that the Rus have *Saqalibah* interpreters and that they are Christians who pay customs accordingly.³¹

The passage gives an overall impression that the Rus were rather well known in the region north of the Caucasus and around the Caspian. Further, they are

Jonathan Couser, Sarah Davis, Darin Hayton and Andrea Sterk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), p. 18; D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1493* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), p. 158. Obolensky also mentions the capture of Sugdaia in the southern Crimea by the Rus in the first half of the ninth century mentioned in the *vita* of St Stephen of Surozh (*ibid.*).

²⁸ *The Homilies of Patriarch Photios of Constantinople*, nos. III and IV.

²⁹ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*, p. 154.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. vii–xxiii; J. Montgomery, 'Arabic Sources on the Vikings', p. 551. P. B. Golden, ('Rus', *EI2*, pp. 618–29) however, dates the notice on the Rus to before 840.

³¹ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-Masalik wa 'l-Mamalik*, pp. 154–55.

reported to have been on such good terms with the Khazars, who reigned supreme in this region at the time, that they were able to use the Volga river. In fact, later Arabic writer repeatedly connect similar features with the Rus and it is probable that such geographical proximity to both the Islamic Caliphate and the Khazars would have allowed for opportunities for the Rus to enter the writings of Muslim geographers and historians in this period.

In the scholarship on the Arabic sources on the Rus there has been a question mark over a purportedly still earlier reference which appears in the *Kitab Surat al-ard* of Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Musa al-Khwarizmi (d. c. 850),³² a reworking of the *Geographia* of Ptolemy as we have mentioned. While it contains much of the original material it is in many places supplemented with new information by Al-Khwarizmi derived from his own lifetime. Among the long lists of places and their coordinates we find a mention of a certain mountain, which Al-Khwarizmi places in the sixth climate. The quote runs: 'the river d.r.<y>.u.s which flows from the mountain of <'>.r.u.s'.

At least three scholars have taken note of this. Anatolii Petrovich Novoseltsev, Peter Golden in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, and most recently James Montgomery, have all suggested that this may be the first reference to the Rus.³³ It is important to note here that although the dating of Al-Khwarizmi's work is uncertain, some scholars have put it as early as the early 830s or even around 820,³⁴ in which case his reference would indeed be the earliest.

³² In contrast with the fame achieved by Al-Khwarizmi's scientific contributions and inventions especially in the fields of mathematics and astronomy, little is known of the man himself. In the few lines dedicated to him in the *Kitab al-fihrist* of Abu 'l-Faraj Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Nadim, composed towards the end of the tenth century and containing short bio-bibliographical passages on hundreds of notable authors, he is connected to the *Bayt al-Hikma* in Baghdad and seems to have composed most of his works in the reign of Al-Ma'mun between 813 and 833 (*The Fihrist of al-Nadim*, ed. and trans. by B. Dodge (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970). For bibliography and biographical details of Al-Khwarizmi see J. Vernet, 'Al-Khwarizmi', *EI2*, pp. 1070–71; GAL, p. 257; J. F. P. Hopkins, 'Geographical and Navigational Literature', 303–07.

³³ A. P. Novoseltsev, 'Vostochnye i zapadnye istochniki o drevnerusskom gosudarstve', in *Drevnerusskoe gosudarstvo i ego mezhdunarodnoe znachenie*, ed. by V.T. Pashuto and L.V. Cherepnin (Moskva: Nauka, 1965), pp. 373–74; P. B. Golden, 'Rus', p. 620; J. E. Montgomery, 'Arabic Sources on the Vikings', p. 551.

³⁴ E. S. and M. H. Kennedy, *Geographical Coordinates of Localities from Islamic Sources*, Veröffentlichungen des Institutes für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften (Frankfurt am Main: Goethe-Universität, 1984), p. xxii.

The text of *Kitab Surat al-Ard* presents various difficulties. The first of these arises from the fact that the only surviving manuscript produced in the eleventh century (Cod. 4247, Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, Strasbourg) is quite lacunose. Secondly, there is not always consistency in diacritical marking neither of the coordinates for longitude and latitude, which are written in letters with numerical value instead of numbers, nor in the writing of the place names themselves. Another peculiarity is that the prime or zero meridian that Al-Khwarizmi employed in his geodesy is not the same as that of Ptolemy which was fixed around the Canary Islands, but some ten degrees west of his at an imaginary ‘western shore of the encompassing sea’, i.e. the Atlantic ocean. This practise shifts the entire paradigm of longitudinal coordinates ten degrees westwards.³⁵

On closer examination of the coordinates given for the location of the ‘mountain of Rus’ in the *Kitab Surat al-Ard* it is tempting to conclude that Al-Khwarizmi is not referring to the Rus. At any rate the entry appears to contradict their location as it is conveyed to us by subsequent ninth and tenth century Arabic geographers.³⁶ First of all, the coordinates, according to his system, quite consistently (this location is actually repeated several times in his work) point to a longitude of about 27 and a latitude of about 44 which according to Al-Khwarizmi’s system brings us to north-western Spain approximately. Secondly, several place names in the geographical vicinity of this ‘mountain of Rus’ seem to confirm this approximate location such as Logroño, or perhaps Lyon in France, and Baiona. This reading can, however, be debated because again there is an absence of dots above or below the letters (see fig. 2).

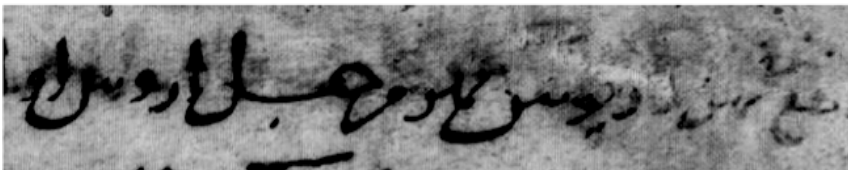


Figure. 2. A sample from the *Kitab Surat al-Ard*, cod. 4247 in the Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, Strasbourg. We see the *alif* at the beginning of the last word on the left (‘.r.u/w.s), almost merged with the final *lam* of the penultimate word (*jabal* =mountain).

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. xi.

³⁶ Cf. H. Stang, *The Naming of Russia, Meddelelser*, no. 77 (Oslo: Oslo University, 1996), p. 181.

In this case, the river *drms* or *dryms* then could possibly denote the well known river Duero or *Durius* (or *Dorius*) in its Latin form, which begins in the mountains north-west of Soria in north-western Spain and empties into the Atlantic Ocean in Oporto. Indeed if we follow the coordinates a little further this seems to be the case as they appear to point to a location in northern Portugal. Additionally, in the word ‘*rus*’, as it appears in the manuscript, there is a sporadic appearance of an initial *alif* which may change our reading to include a vowel although, as is customary, the Arabic does not mark the quality of that vowel.³⁷ Without adequate micro-topographical maps at hand it has hitherto not been possible to identify any place name A/I/U-rus or the like although in the Pyrenees to the east there are both *Urús* and *Arús* and not far from Soria there is a mount Rasón. Here, however, we are venturing too far into the territory of speculation. Still, the mountains whence springs the Duero are called *Picos de Urbión* where mount Urbión has the greatest elevation, which possibly provides the underlying form for the Arabic *u.r.m.s.* > *urwis* or something to that effect, given that it was known as such when Al-Khwarazmi composed his work. At any rate, the spelling deviates from later forms denoting the Rus which do not show this initial *alif*.

It may nevertheless be possible to propose a different path of interpretation which departs from the assumption, which several scholars have made, that Al-Khwarizmi *mas* referring to a people named Rus and not simply to a physical geographical feature with a similar name. Previous suggestions in that vein were naturally grounded on the assumption that the ‘mountain of rus’ referred to a location in Eastern Europe and not in Spain as has been argued here, but there are nevertheless a few options that can be explored.

The extant sources on the Scandinavian incursions in the Iberian peninsula, both Muslim and Christian, point on several occasions to their presence in Northern Spain. It is true that the Muslim writers in Al-Andalus did not employ the name ‘Rus’ for the Nordic marauders. One of the names they apparently did, however, assign to them is ‘*majus*’, which in Arabic originally referred to the Zoroastrians

³⁷ Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, Strasbourg, Cod. 4247. See also the edition of Hans von Mzik, *Kitab Surat al-Ard* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1926), p. 132.

of Iran.³⁸ In one of the most important histories of Muslim Spain, the eleventh century *Al-Muqtabis fī tarikeb al-Andalus* of Ibn Hayyan (The collected knowledge on the history of Al-Andalus), there is a mention of a ‘mountain of majus’ (Ar. *jabal majus*).³⁹ The context in which this reference finds place is one of the summer expeditions (Ar. *sa’ifa*) of the Emir Abd Ar-Rahman II, more specifically in 825 when general Ubayd Allah set upon the region of Álava, and a fierce battle took place in the foothills of a mountain so named.

The Spanish scholar Anton Erkoreka suggested that ‘majus’ in Ibn Hayyan’s work refers to Northmen, and even made a tentative identification of the mountain in question as the Sollube, which is near Busturia in the northern part of the Basque country.⁴⁰ Be that as it may, we are still tempted to ask whether there can be a connection between Ibn Hayyan’s ‘mountain of majus’ and Al-Khwarazmi’s ‘mountain of Rus’, if that is possibly how the latter should be understood?

At the outset such a connection is not unthinkable considering that at least two early Muslim writers associate the two names with the same people. In the *Kitab al-Buldan* (Book of the Lands) completed in 891, Al-Ya’qubi recounts the sack of Seville in 844 by those he claims to be ‘the majus who are called Rus’ (Arab. *al-majus alladhin yuqal labum ar-Rus*).⁴¹ Al-Ya’qubi does not relate where he obtains this information. However, living in Cairo and writing less than fifty years after the event he would possibly have had access to multiple sources both written and oral. The notion that ‘Rus’ and ‘majus’ applied to one and the same people is also aired by Al-Mas’udi writing in the mid-tenth century.⁴² If the name was then transmitted from Muslim Spain to Al-Khwarazmi’s desk in Baghdad, and if he had acquired the same information as Al-Ya’qubi, he could have opted for the

³⁸ A. Melvinger, ‘Madjus’, *EI2*, p. 1118–21. Another instance of this application of the term is found in the travelogue of Ibrahim b. Ya’qub (see below section 2.5.1) in his description of Ireland (M. André, ‘L’Europe occidentale dans la relation arabe d’Ibrahim b. Ya’qub (Xe siècle)’, *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 21e année, no. 5 (1966), pp. 1048–64 (p. 1067 and fn. 5).

³⁹ A. Melvinger, ‘Madjus’, p. 1119.

⁴⁰ A. Erkoreka, ‘Vikingerne i Vasconia’, in *Vikingerne på Den Iberiske Halvø* (Viborg: Norhaven, 2004), pp. 9–40 (p. 20) (transl. by L. Rifbjerg and C. H. Ottesen and rearranged from the Spanish *Historia de los vikingos en España: ataques e incursiones contra los reinos cristianos y musulmanes de la Península Ibérica en los siglos IX–XI*, ed. by E. Morales Romero (Madrid: Miraguano Ediciones, 2004).

⁴¹ Al-Ya’qubi, *Kitab al-Buldan*, p. 354. A. Melvinger, ‘Madjus’, pp. 1118–21.

⁴² Al-Mas’udi, *Kitab muruj adb-dhabab*, vol. 1, p. 191.

name 'Rus' according to local usage, as it indeed appears in Ibn Khurradadhbih writings a few years later.

This interpretation, however, seems to run into more than one *culs-de-sac*. First of all, the Scandinavians are usually regarded to have only entered the Iberian Peninsula after 840, which makes Ibn Hayyan's 'mountain of majus' in the expedition of Abd Ar-Rahman II in 825 seem somewhat early. Secondly, Ibn Hayyan employs this name for an even earlier event, when in an 816 expedition the general Hayib 'Abd al-Karim fought victoriously in Pamplona, where among the fallen was the mightiest warrior of the Majus.⁴³ In this case the chronological gap until the arrival of the Northmen is even greater, and the term is probably to be understood simply as 'pagans'.

Although it is possible that lost sources may have contained otherwise unattested references to the Northmen in Spain prior to their raids in the 840s, which found their way into Al-Khwarazmi's work, the level of speculation required such an assumption is sufficient to turn our attention again to Ibn Khurradadhbih's work as containing the earliest attestation of the name 'Rus' in the Arabic literature.

If, however, despite the improbabilities we have discussed, Al-Khwarazmi was referring to the Rus, then there would be no serious problem in postulating that Ibn Khurradadhbih obtained this name from him. The two were, prestigious scholars who both carried out their work to a large extent in Baghdad, and possibly within a decade or so of each other. Indeed in the latter part of Ibn Khurradadhbih's passage, which nevertheless seems heavily intertwined with the passage on the trading company of the Jewish Radhaniyya that appears just before it, the Rus are said to come from Spain (*al-Andalus*) whereas the Radhaniyya are not. Other than that, there is little in Ibn Khurradadhbih's work which might indicate any connection with Al-Khwarazmi's text regarding this passage.

It remains unclear how this name was transmitted and taken up by Ibn Khurradadhbih, whether for example it was an endonym of the peoples themselves which had been carried via the multiple trading nexuses connecting

⁴³ A. Erkoreka, 'Vikingerne i Vasconia', p. 15.

with the Muslim world or whether it was perhaps obtained via the fertile intellectual and scholarly exchange with Byzantium which was noted in chapter one. From 'Theophilus' embassy to Louis the Pious in Ingelheim in 839 it can be inferred that the Rus appear to have been known to the Byzantines at least a few years before Ibn Khurradadhbih is believed to have written his work. This, in turn, indicates that it is probably more likely to have been transmitted from Byzantium to the Caliphate than the other way around. The name, at any rate, does not seem to belong to any tradition, Quranic or other, that our Muslim geographers can be demonstrated to have drawn upon.

Even though the surviving earliest reports on the Rus date to around 840, the people or peoples known by this name may have been known some time prior to that in eastern lands, namely in Khazaria, the Islamic Caliphate and in Byzantium. It is admittedly problematic to ascertain with any precision the extent of the delay from the first arrival of the Rus on the scene to their earliest appearance in Ibn Khurradadhbih's writings shortly before the mid-ninth century. However, if we connect their presence in Khazarian lands with the drastically increased trade in silver dirham coins that began around 800, with which they are connected by later authors such as Ibn Rustah and Ibn Fadlan,⁴⁴ and if Ibn Khurradadhbih's information perhaps slightly predated the time in which he composed his work to around or even before 840 as has been suggested by Peter Golden, this could be a period of between 30 or 40 years. This supposition may gain further credence from the fact that the majority of reports on the Rus in the Arabic sources coincide with the heyday of this trade, that is the period leading up to the middle of the tenth century.⁴⁵ Arguably, a factor in all this is that the appearance of the Rus as a commonplace name in the Arabic geographical literature is coeval with the emergence of geographical science and exploration in the Caliphate, and in particular with certain writers who took interest in the regions north of the Caucasus. If this branch of Muslim geography had developed earlier, we would perhaps possess earlier notices on the Rus.

⁴⁴ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, p. 147, describes how coins are posited in the grave of their notables, and Ibn Fadlan, *Risalah*, p. 210: "Around their necks they wear hoops of gold and silver: whenever a man possesses ten thousand dirhams, he has a hoop made for his wife; if he possesses twenty thousand dirhams, he has two hoops made for her – for every ten thousand more, he gives another hoop to his wife."

⁴⁵ T. S. Noonan 'Scandinavians in European Russia', in *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by P. H. Sawyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 134–55 (p. 134).

2.3 Reports from the Mid-ninth to the Early Tenth Century

Thus, Ibn Khurradadhbih's report marks the beginning of the documentation of the Rus among the Muslim geographers and historians. Yet, writing at a time when Islamic geography was still in its infancy he would have had few if any models on which to base his work. Ibn Khurradadhbih admits having consulted with the work of Ptolemy in some shape or form, and it is probable that he benefitted from the advancement of geographical work of earlier scholars in the first half of the ninth century, especially those under the auspices of Caliph Ma'mun. He appears to have been born in Khurasan but he grew up and was educated in Baghdad.⁴⁶ Ibn Khurradadhbih became director of the caliphal postal and intelligence service in the Jibal region in Iran and subsequently in Samarra' and Baghdad. It was an advantageous position to gather the sort of information preserved in his work, *Masalik wa 'l-mamalik* (The Book of Routes and Kingdoms), which is basically a treatise on itineraries and tax revenues interspersed with accounts of various peoples as well as more literary contributions in the form of stories and poetry. He wrote this work possibly in 847-48 and later revised his work around 885-86, but the passage which interests us here is thought to belong to the earlier version.⁴⁷

Ibn Khurradadhbih writes that the Rus (*ar-Rus*, i.e. with the definite article as it subsequently appears in later Arabic sources) are merchants (*Ar. tijar*) who trade on the Caspian Sea and that they even take their merchandise as far as to Baghdad after landing in Jurjan and travelling on camel back from there. Ibn Khurradadhbih also describes an alternative route to Byzantium (*bahr ar-Rum*), where the emperor levies tax on the Rus.⁴⁸ He adds that they claim to be Christians and as such pay lower customs for their merchandise. It is indeed in this general area, i.e. around the Caspian Sea and north of the Caucasus, that we find the Rus in most of the ninth and tenth century Arabic sources. A similar version of the trade route described by Ibn Khurradadhbih is later repeated by

⁴⁶ C. E. Bosworth, 'Ebn Kordadhbih', *Eir*, vol. viii, p. 37.

⁴⁷ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-Masalik wa 'l-mamalik*, pp. vi-xxiii.

⁴⁸ S. Franklin and J. Shepard suggested that Ibn Khurradadhbih is here referring to Cherson on the Crimea, and that the tax-collecting officials involved were the *kommerkiarioi*, known from this period (*The Emergence of Rus*, p. 42).

Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani in the early tenth century although, admittedly, the latter does not explicitly mention the Rus by name (see our discussion below).

The precise meaning of opening line of this passage has long been contested:⁴⁹

hum jins min as-Saqalibah

| | | | | |
|----------------------|-------|---------------------------|------------|---------------------|
| <i>hum</i> | Ø | <i>jins</i> ⁵⁰ | <i>min</i> | <i>al-Saqalibah</i> |
| they [i.e. the Rus] | [are] | people from/of | | the Saqalibah |

Depending on the translation, the Rus are either ‘a people from [among] the Saqalibah’ or, as De Goeje translates it: ‘*Les Russes, qui appartient aux peuples slaves*’. The Arabic is ambiguous here which may well reflect the fact that this distinction was ambiguous for Ibn Khurradadhbih himself. Did the Arabic writers perceive of the Rus as being separate from or a part of these *Saqalibah*? Before we can make any observations in this regard, we should perhaps first look at what the latter word should be taken to mean.

Traditionally, Ar. *saqalibah* is thought to derive from the Greek *sklavanoi* ‘Slav’ and translated as ‘Slav’ or ‘Slavic’. But whereas in modern translations ‘Slav’ refers to ‘The Slavs’, denoting that branch of Europeans not least defined by their linguistic affinities, De Goeje never intended to attach this meaning to the term in his translation of *Saqalibah* in Ibn Khurradadhbih’s work. He translated ‘Saqalibah’ as ‘Slavs’, but not without the prior qualification that Ibn Khurradadhbih used this word to comprise all the peoples of Northern Europe as is indeed attested by other passages in his book.⁵¹ De Goeje chose *Slav* as the appropriate orthographical representation of *Saqalibah* yet retaining the semantic connotations of the term as employed, he believes, by the Arabic writers and not what the modern term ‘Slav’ conveys. In other words, it represents an appropriation for a particular linguistic group of the Indo-European languages and hence the peoples who speak the languages of that group and their culture. In

⁴⁹ P. B. Golden, ‘Rus’, pp. 620–21.

⁵⁰ This word has several meanings, for instance ‘kind, type, variety, species’. Cf. P. B. Golden, ‘The Question of the Rus Qaganate’, *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, vol. 2 (1982), 77–97 (p. 90).

⁵¹ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-Masalik wa ’l-Mamalik*, p. xx. “Qu’Ibn Khordadbeh apelle ces Russes une race de Slaves, cela prouve seulement qu’il comprenait sous ce nom tous les peuples du nord de l’Europe, comme d’autres passages de son livre l’attestent aussi.” See also P. B. Golden, ‘Al-Saqaliba’, *EI2*, p. 872.

his translation of Ibn Fadlan's travelogue which we will examine later on, Zeki Validi Togan has a more or less a similar view of the usage of *Saqalibah*. Commenting on the King of the Volga Bulgars being called 'king of the Saqalibah', Togan further argues that the denomination 'King of the Saqalibah' had more value for the officials in Baghdad than the denomination 'elteber of the Bulghar' which, as we learn later on in Ibn Fadlan's account, was his real or 'native' title.⁵² From this, it is tempting to infer that by '*hum jins min as-saqalibah*', Ibn Khurradadhbih simply intended to classify the Rus as belonging to the northern peoples, with *Saqalibah* having a more or less generic connotation much like the term *Turk* (pl. *atrak*). The term *Turk* appears in several works usually indicating many diverse groups, in particular in the area east of the Caspian in Turkestan.⁵³ Then, with time, this latter denomination slowly gives way to or, alternatively, becomes interchangeable with names that gained prominence in the regions where the 'Turk' label was usually pegged such as *Oghuz* (Ar. *Ghuz*) and, *Pecheneg* (Ar. *Bajanak*). These terms made their appearance more or less coevally with the development of Islamic exploration and geographical science. As such they provided a natural substitution of more generic terms with more specific ones although 'more specific' does in no way eliminate a host of different representations of the entity described.

Ibn Khurradadhbih's report on the Rus does unfortunately not stand in any explicit relationship with any other part of his text and the reason for their inclusion is at the outset not entirely obvious. As to the location of the passages towards the end of the treatise, James Montgomery has suggested that this may reflect the fact that the Rus "are the least important, identifiable people covered" and that

⁵²*Ibn Fadlan's Reisebericht*, ed. by A. Z. V. Togan (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1939), pp. 104–5. "Die Gewinnung eines 'Königs des Saqaliba' des Wolgabeckens war der Regierung von Bagdad und ihren Gesandten mehr wert als die Unterwerfung eines 'Eltebers' des Stammes Bulgar." *Elteber*, attested for example in the Kül-tigin inscriptions of the Khosho Tsaidam monuments complex (Orkhon) dated to the eighth century, is a Turkic title with which the king of the Volga Bulgars is associated elsewhere in Ibn Fadlan's text, rendered as *yiltavar* in the Arabic.

⁵³D. Shapira, 'Iranian Sources on the Khazars', in *The World of the Khazars: New Perspectives: Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Conference*, ed. by P. B. Golden, H. Ben-Shammai and A. Róna-Tas (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 291–306 (p. 293). Even the Rus were sometimes classified as Turks, as we will come to later in this chapter.

in accordance with the stylistic principles of early *adab* texts, in which implicit authorial comment can be effected by means of a juxtaposition of units of information devoid of explicit comment, then, Ibn Khurradadhbih's evaluative treatment of the Rus is dismissive almost to the point of disbelief in their existence: they inhabit, of course, the northernmost clime of the sphere, in which life was scarcely deemed possible, on the outermost rim of the geographical system at the heart of which lay the holy city of Mecca and the imperial heart of Baghdad.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the peripheral status of the Rus as they appear in all later Arabic texts save one (Ibn Fadlan), gives us perhaps little reason to expect that they would feature more prominently in Ibn Khurradadhbih's work. Indeed the repeated reference to the Rus among subsequent authors seems to convey to us that they had some sort of impact, however weak or marginal. This indicates that they had entered the sphere of interest or the sphere of necessary or desirable knowledge of the Arabic geographers and historians. Therefore we should perhaps look into why Ibn Khurradadhbih included the Rus in his treatise at all.

Immediately preceding the passage on the Rus there is a similar account of the trade routes of Jewish merchants referred to as the *Radhaniyya*. Some scholars have proposed that there may have been some interpolation between the two. Omeljan Pritsak believed that the trading corporation of the Rus replaced that of the Radhaniyya and hence the original information on their respective trade routes do not originate from the same period. To explain how this interpolation came about he proposes that when an official in Baghdad collected information on the trade route of the Rus, he closely associated both corporations because of the similarities between the two. In consequence, he would have then incorporated or somehow juxtaposed his report on the newcomers into the older report on the ar-Radhaniyya and subsequently entered it either in the margin of the older document or on a separate sheet inserted on a level between the two

⁵⁴ J. E. Montgomery, 'Serendipity, Resistance and Multivalency: Ibn Khurradadhbih and his *Kitab al-Masalik wa-l-mamalik*', in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. by P. F. Kennedy, Studies in Arabic language and literature, vol. 6 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 177–230 (p. 187).

parts of the route description of the ar-Radhaniyya.⁵⁵ Unfortunately we possess no further sources in support of such speculations.

Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani, writing around 900, appears to present an amalgamated version of both routes but, in addition, his text includes several items different from that of Ibn Khurradadhbih, which may indicate that the two authors used different sources and, importantly, Ibn al-Faqih does not explicitly mention the Rus.⁵⁶ As Marqwart pointed out,⁵⁷ as his source for this information Ibn al-Faqih cites a treatise by a certain predecessor of his, Muhammad b. Ishaq al-Faqih al-Hamadhani, on the city of Rayy through which lay the trade route from Jurjan to Baghdad, exalting it as an important centre of trade. Both authors were, as their *nisba*⁵⁸ indicates, natives of Hamadhan in the region of Jibal (modern western Iran) and such a panegyric to one's own quarter of the world was customary.

It is thus possible to discern two different motives for Ibn Khurradadhbih and Ibn al-Faqih to include this particular passage in their writings: the former was more international (for lack of a better word) in thought because of his erudition and position as the head of intelligence and postal services, and he added the information on the Rus so that it might serve as practical or useful information for those interested in keeping track of the routes and the activities with which they were associated. Ibn al-Faqih, on the other hand, appears more local in thought. He is more inclined to elaborate the aesthetics of his writings and would perhaps care less for the practical purposes of his text. Ibn al-Faqih's motive for including this trade route in his text therefore may have indeed been to emphasise the importance of his region. As to why Ibn al-Faqih does not mention the Rus explicitly we can surmise that either a) his passage, or the text of Muhammad b.

⁵⁵ O. Pritsak, 'An Arabic Text on the Trade Route of the Corporation of Ar-Rus in the Second Half of the Ninth Century', *Folia Orientalia*, vol. XII (1970), 241–59 (p. 244). See also Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-Masalik wa'l-Mamalik*, p. 153, fn. *k*.

⁵⁶ Ibn Al-Faqih, *Kitab al-Buldan*, pp. 270–71.

⁵⁷ J. Marqwart, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge: Ethnologische und historisch-topographische Studien zur Geschichte des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), p. 203, fn. 1 and pp. 350–51. O. Pritsak ('An Arabic Text', p. 246) suggested that Muhammad b. Ishaq al-Faqih (author of the passage on Rayy) and our Ibn al-Faqih were in fact father and son. It is not clear on what evidence this theory is based.

⁵⁸ The part of an Arabic name which states one's provenance, here: Hamadhani = inhabitant of, or originating from, Hamadhan.

Ishaq ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani which may be its source, is based on information that pre-dates the arrival of the Rus in this region or b) by the time he was writing the Rus had simply ceased to operate along this particular trade route. The latter option is perhaps more plausible. Given that Ibn al-Faqih was a native of one of the more important posts on this trade route and would therefore have more or less direct information on events and affairs that concerned it. The absence of the Rus in his account may then be connected with the abovementioned switch of the main trade routes northwards from the Caliphate away from the Caucasus and Khazaria to the East of the Caspian with the establishment of the trade route between the Samanids and the Volga Bulgars around the time or shortly before Ibn al-Faqih wrote the *Kitab al-Buldan*.

If in fact the Rus were replacing or taking over part of the operations of the Radhaniyya as has been suggested,⁵⁹ or any other important trade route, then there is ample justification for their mention in the *Kitab al-Masalik wa l-Mamalik*. However, as Montgomery has pointed out their appearance in the text remains highly marginal, and Ibn Khurradadhbih included the Rus in a part of his text apparently devoted to miscellanea, near the end, grouped with accounts of the Radhaniyya, of a volcano in Sicily and a place where it never stops raining.

2.3.1 Al-Ya'qubi

Midway between Ibn Khurradadhbih's account and Ibn Faqih's 'omission', we encounter a single sentence on the Rus, which despite its brevity is not without importance. Ahmad Al-Ya'qubi (d. early 10th century) was born in Baghdad in the ninth century and trained to be a member of the secretarial class which led him to serve both in Armenia and later in Khurasan until 872 or 873 when he settled in Egypt. There he spent the remainder of his life and composed in 891 the *Kitab al-Buldan* (Book of the Lands) which is one of his three important surviving works.⁶⁰ The *Kitab al-Buldan* is administrative geography of the lands of

⁵⁹ O. Pritsak, 'An Arabic Text', p. 243 and P. B. Golden, 'Rus', p. 621.

⁶⁰ M. Q. Zaman, 'Al-Ya'qubi', *EI2*, pp. 257–58; *GAL*, pp. 258–60.

Islam including a rather lengthy treatment of Baghdad and Samarra, of the Turks and of the Nubians in southern Egypt and northern Sudan. The work provides a wealth of historical, topographical and statistical information on the regions it describes. The *Kitab al-Buldan* has not survived in its entirety and unfortunately it lacks the entire section on the northern regions, which we would perhaps expect to contain a passage on the Rus.

The Rus are mentioned only once in the whole of Al-Ya‘qubi’s work, yet this single reference is unusual in that it connects them with their more westerly counterparts, apparently the first such instance in the Arabic corpus.⁶¹

The city of Seville, on a mighty river, the river of Cordoba <which> entered the Majus who are called Rus (Arab. *al-majus alladhina yuqal lahum ar-rus*) in the year 229 and captured, plundering, burning and slaughtering...⁶²

Again, as with Ibn Khurradadhbih, the Rus are referred to near the end of the text in a section which is dedicated Al-Andalus, and the passage does not have a bearing on or connection with other parts of his work. The event Al-Ya‘qubi describes, the attack on Seville in 844/5, was obviously noteworthy and quite naturally included in his account of Al-Andalus, which is however rather short. This surprisingly successful attack, when we compare the size of the Muslim army to that of the Rus, proved to be a memorable event. Indeed several later historians such as Razi and Ibn al-Qutiyya include it in their accounts.⁶³ The latter tells us that it caused such alarm that it prompted the erection of a fortified wall by the Emir Abd al-Rahman II.⁶⁴

Al-Ya‘qubi does not state where he obtained this information but living in Cairo and writing less than fifty years after the event he would possibly have multiple sources, written and oral, to choose from. The reference to Rus in connection

⁶¹ The only other such examples are found with Ibn Hawqal and al-Mas‘udi (cf. below), who express a vague notion of the Rus in Al-Andalus which may again simply reflect that they knew Al-Ya‘qubi’s work.

⁶² Al-Ya‘qubi, *Kitab al-Buldan*, p. 304 [transl. T. J. H.].

⁶³ For excerpts from several Muslim and non-Muslim sources on this event cf. E. Morales Romero, ‘Vikingerne i al-Andalus’, in *Vikingerne på Den Iberiske Halvø*, pp. 53–96.

⁶⁴ *Early Islamic Spain: the History of Ibn al-Qutiyya*, ed. by David James (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 101.

with an attack that has been attributed to the Vikings (usually *majus*, *urduman* and variants thereof among the Muslim writers of Al-Andalus) may be seen to favour the identification of these people as Scandinavian, although we are left guessing as to Al-Ya‘qubi’s method of distinguishing or connecting the two since no further context or information is provided.

2.4 Tenth Century Accounts

Whereas reports on the Rus up until the early tenth century were few and far between, their number would grow significantly over the next decades. Indeed, as we move into the tenth century, the accounts of the Rus become more elaborate and substantial. The material changes from being short and isolated topical notices to descriptions of a more ethnographic nature. It is possible to assume that this reflects the beginning of a period in which the Arabic writers had both more direct contact with the Rus and also more second hand notices of them. This in turn reflects a greater Rus presence and importance in the geographical area deemed by Arabic writers to be worthy of documentation or a source of desirable knowledge.

Several factors in particular may have contributed to the increased interest among the Muslim writers in documenting the Rus. First, judging by the numismatic material, Thomas Noonan concluded that the first half of the tenth century saw the peak of trade between the Caliphate and the northern regions.⁶⁵ This development would have entailed increased presence and communication especially with the Muslim Volga Bulgars, and possibly with the Samanid traders who brought the coins to Bulghar. In other words, the Rus were then in close contact with peoples that were of importance to the Muslim geographers and historians of the period. Secondly, the Rus are reported to conduct several violent raids on the coast of the Caspian Sea where the killings of many Muslims of the region would have had repercussions in the Islamic world. From this

⁶⁵ T. S. Noonan (with the assistance of Gert Rispling and Roman Kovalev), ‘Viking-age Dirham Hoards from Eastern and Northern Europe’, in *A Survey of Numismatic Research 1990–1995* (Berlin: International Numismatic Commission, 1997), p. 134.

period we have several important texts and the information relayed to us becomes fuller and more varied. The most informative among our sources are Al-Mas'udi's writings around the mid-tenth century and the account of Ibn Fadlan who gives us by far the most detailed description of the Rus to which chapter three is devoted in its entirety and will thus not be included here.

2.4.1 Ibn Rustah and the Jayhani Tradition

Of the tenth-century works containing accounts of the Rus, the *Kitab al-A'laq an-Nafisah* (the Book of Precious Jewels) of Abu 'Ali Ahmad b. 'Umar Ibn Rustah⁶⁶ is the earliest, although there are differing views about its exact date of composition. In all likelihood it was written in the first two decades of the tenth century and possibly as early as shortly after 903.⁶⁷ The author was a native of Isfahan in modern western central Iran and his description of his home city is one of the most important that has come down to us from the medieval period. For his account on the northern peoples Ibn Rustah relies in part on Ibn Khurradadhbih, whom he occasionally credits as his source of information. Many scholars agree that Ibn Rustah was also a continuator of the so-called Jayhani tradition, associated with the writings of Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad b. Ahmad Jayhani who became vizier of the Samanids in 914 and resided in Bukhara.⁶⁸ It is through that Jayhani's geographical work, which is lost, was of great importance due to its apparent originality and methodology. The geographer and historian Gardizi states that "he wrote letters to all the countries of the world and requested that the customs of every court and *divan* should

⁶⁶ S. Maqbul Ahmad, 'Ibn Rusta' *EI2*, pp. 920–21; GAL, p. 260; H. Göckenjan and I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter: Die Jayhani-Tradition* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001), pp. 34–35. C.E. Bosworth, 'Ebn Kordadbeh', pp. 49–50.

⁶⁷ J. E. Montgomery ('Ibn Rusta's Lack of 'Eloquence', the Rus, and Samanid Cosmography', *Edebiyat*, vol. 12 (2001), 73–93 (pp. 73–74)) dates the work to between 903 and 913. De Goeje suggested that he wrote in *c.* 903 because he does not mention any event past that date (Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-Masalik wa 'l-Mamalik*, pp. v–vi). This opinion was corroborated by D. M. Dunlop (*Arab Civilization to A.D. 1500* (London: Longman, 1971), p. 164), P. B. Golden (*Khazar Studies: An Historico-Philological Inquiry into the Origins of the Khazars*, vol I (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980), p. 115) and A. Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman*, vol. II (1973), p. xxii.

⁶⁸ C. Pellat, 'Al-Djayhani', *EI2*, pp. 265–66. H. Göckenjan and I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*, pp. 1–12.

written down and brought to him, such [as existed in] the Byzantine Empire, Turkistan, Hindustan, China.”⁶⁹ The geographer Muqaddasi writing in the late tenth century tells us that Jayhani also used the work of Ibn Khurradadhbih as his source and, moreover, that he “assembled foreigners, questioned them on the kingdoms, their revenues, the kind of roads leading to them...”.⁷⁰ The writings of Jayhani found continuation in several later works, notably the late tenth century anonymous *Hudud al-Alam* (the regions/borders of the world) and the works of Gardizi, Marwazi, Al-Bakri from the eleventh and the twelfth centuries.

Minorsky describes Jayhani’s work, which was titled *Kitab al-masalik wa’l-mamalik* (Book of Routes and Kingdoms) as a source of the highest importance and adds that “writing in Bukhara, Jayhani could extend the field of his investigation much deeper into Central Asia [...] than was possible for his Arab contemporaries. Therein consists the outstanding importance of the passages from Jayhani which have survived in later sources.”⁷¹ According to Muqaddasi, he found copies of both Jayhani’s and Ibn Khurradadhbih’s texts in Nishapur and discovered that they were the same, although Jayhani was slightly more voluminous. From this it could be deduced that Jayhani incorporated in his book the entire original work of Ibn Khurradadhbih, the homonymous *Kitab al-masalik wa ’l-mamalik* which was probably originally composed before the mid-ninth century.⁷² Regarding its date of composition, the Hungarian scholar István Zimonyi concludes that the crucial point is the date of Ibn Rustah’s work since he supposedly excerpted the work of Jayhani.⁷³ Minorsky’s stance in this debate was that “I. Rusta’s quotations are probably borrowed from the complete I.Kh. [Ibn Khurradadhbih – T. J. H.] (which was used by Jayhani as his ground-work), or possibly that I. Rusta used only an earlier draft of Jayhani which did not include the later additions.”⁷⁴ István Zimonyi and Hansgerd Göckenjan have recently proposed that Jayhani may have

⁶⁹ Gardizi, *Zayn al-Akbar*, ed. by V. Minorsky (London: 1937), p. xvii. H. Göckenjan and I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter: Die Jayhani-Tradition* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001), p. 36.

⁷⁰ V. Minorsky, *Zayn al-Akbar*, p. xvii.

⁷¹ Marwazi, *On China, the Turks and India*, ed. by V. Minorsky (Arabic text and translation). (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), pp. 6–7.

⁷² Al-Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-taqasim fi ma’rifat al-aqalim*, p. 241; C. Pellat, ‘Al-Djayhani’, p. 266.

⁷³ I. Zimonyi, *The Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, Studia Uralo–Altaica, vol. 32 (Szeged: Jozsef Attila University, 1990), p. 21. W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (London: Luzac, 1968), pp. 511–13), however, held the opinion that Ibn Rustah had utilized a more complete version of Ibn Khurradadhbih that has not come down to us.

⁷⁴ Marwazi, *On China, the Turks and India*, p. 9.

drawn on the works of Abdallah ibn al-Muqaffa‘ who wrote in the eighth century, and the works of Muslim ibn Abi Muslim al-Jarmi and Harun ibn Yahya who both were prisoners in Constantinople in the ninth century.⁷⁵

Another twist in the problematic nature of Jayhani’s work appears in Ibn Fadlan’s account. He tells us that on his way to Bulghar, he met Jayhani⁷⁶ who by then, as already noted, had become a vizier of the Samanids residing at Bukhara. We cannot be sure of the nature of Ibn Fadlan’s and Jayhani’s relations but Minorsky assumes that “I. Fadlan kept in touch with ... Jayhani and informed him of his experiences in Bulghar (possibly by way of private communication, or even orally). Such information may have been incorporated in the later copies of Jayhani’s work, and this would account for some passages in Marwazi and elsewhere, which sound like echoes from I. Fadlan.”⁷⁷ It seems thus that Jayhani would have continued his compilation of stories and notices on various peoples until well after Ibn Rustah wrote his work at the beginning of the tenth century. This leads us to the obvious conclusion that the latter could only have benefitted from parts of the former’s entire work dating from the late ninth century or the first years of the tenth century.

Ibn Rustah’s tells us that the Rus live on an island, promontory or peninsula (Arab. *jazīrah* has all these meanings) that is surrounded by a lake (*buhayrā*). Unfortunately he does not provide any further information on the geographical location of this island. We are further informed that their ruler bears the title *khaqan* and that the Rus raid the Saqalibah whom they take prisoners and sell to the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. The Rus are said not to have cultivated lands and that they live on what they amass through pillaging the Saqalibah. The passage proceeds in staccato fashion to recount customs, clothing and funerary rituals. This last item contains elements similar to those found in the later works of Ibn Fadlan and Al-Mas‘udi such as the sacrifice of a woman with her master and the presence of a gold bracelet in funerary rituals, as we will see in chapter three.

⁷⁵ I. Zimonyi and H. Göckenjan, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*, pp. 32–34.

⁷⁶ Ibn Fadlan, *Risalah*, p. 76.

⁷⁷ Marwazi, *On China, the Turks and India*, p. 7.

The fact that Ibn Rustah makes no attempt at geographically pinpointing these Rus contrasts with other, textually adjacent, peoples described in his work. Although there is some discrepancy even regarding this feature of his text; the Saqalibah are placed north of Bulghar in one place while apparently west of them in another. Furthermore, ‘Saqalibah’ seems to be a collective name in one place while in another passage it refers to a particular group of people.⁷⁸ Thus it seems that even within the same text notices that are remarkably close to one another appear to convey different connotations of one and the same name (see our discussion of Ibn Khurradadhbih’s text above). This may in part be explained by the apparently collated nature of Ibn Rustah’s work in which numerous accounts are gathered from various source material. What this reveals, however, is that as regards these notices either Ibn Rustah, his copyists, or both, seem to have been unable to evaluate critically the information they recorded.

The proposition of some scholars to place Ibn Rustah’s Rus in Novgorod, tallying with the *Primary Chronicle* and interpretations of archaeological remains, may need some further reconsideration.⁷⁹ First of all, as already mentioned, Ibn Rustah gives no specific geographical indications as to their whereabouts of the Rus. Secondly, as we have also discussed, the Muslim geographers preceding, contemporaneous with and immediately succeeding Ibn Rustah can not easily be shown to have any specific knowledge of regions as far north-west as Novgorod.⁸⁰ It is true that the writings of Ptolemy, known to these writers mention far-off places such as *Hibernia* and *Thule*. However, for Muslim geographers these were likely merely symbols denoting the extreme north, akin to the island of the Amazones and the land of Gog and Magog. In other words, they were not a part of the emerging explorative geography that the Muslim

⁷⁸ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a’laq an-nafisah*, pp. 143–45.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, J. Shepard and S. Franklin, *The Emergence of Rus*, pp. 40–41, and more recently W. Duczko, *Viking Rus*, p. 33, and discussion in chapter one.

⁸⁰ The first exception to this appears in the second half of the tenth century in the Andalusī traveller Ibrahim ibn Ya’qub At-Turtushi (from Tortosa near the Ebro delta) who apparently visited central or northern central Europe in 965, but who obviously could not have provided Ibn Rustah with this material. More problematic is the account Al-Ghazal’s journey to the Vikings in the first half of the ninth century which mostly lacks specific geographical data is apparently a conflation of an embassy to Constantinople in which Al-Ghazal also participated (see Sara M. Pons-Sanz, ‘Whom Did Al-Ghazal Meet? An Exchange of Embassies between the Arabs from Al-Andalus and the Vikings’, *Saga Book*, vol. 28 (2004), 5–28.

geographers were amassing in relation to the expansion of Islam. We already mentioned earlier the endeavour of the great Al-Mas'udi in the mid-tenth century to establish the origin of the river Don, which led him to the spurious conclusion that it emerged from a large sea and mountains somewhere in the north, yet he was able to verify that the Volga and the Don were two separate bodies of water. As with al-Khwarazmi's work, this situation is in part due to the merging of contemporary geographical knowledge and the ever-impinging heritage of Ptolemy, many of whose concepts and coordinates it took centuries to improve on.

Ibn Rustah places the Rus among peoples that subsist in a geographical continuum that extends approximately from the areas around the Caspian Sea westwards to just north of the Black Sea and northwards to the mid-Volga region where the Volga Bulgars resided. Although his description of the location of the Rus (*jazīrah bayna al-buhayra*) is usually translated neutrally as 'island/peninsula in the lake', the word *buhayra* was assigned by Al-Muqaddasi in the late tenth century specifically to the Caspian Sea.⁸¹ This is possibly how we should understand Ibn Rustah's account too. Further in support of this view is the fact that the Rus are grouped in the text with other peoples in that region. Seen within that particular cultural context, the correspondence of certain details of their funerary ceremony may further favour the proposition that Ibn Rustah's Rus should be seen as akin to the Rus described by Ibn Fadlan and Al-Mas'udi and therefore neither Novgorodian nor Kievan but rather subsisting in or near the southern or central Khazarian lands.

Ibn Rustah apparently used for his composition many different accounts of the Rus dating from various periods from the middle of the ninth century (Ibn Khurradadhbih, Al-Jarmi, Jayhani) until the beginning of the tenth century which he attempted to amalgamate into a single narrative. Aside from our tentative identification of *buhayra* as the Caspian Sea, due to his multiple sources it is perhaps not altogether surprising that he would have been unable to assign the Rus a fixed location or describe them in a coherent and systematic way.⁸² and

⁸¹ Al-Muqaddasi, *Absan al-taqasim fi ma'rifat al-aqalim*, p. 353.

⁸² See J. E. Montgomery, 'Ibn Rustah's Lack of 'Eloquence'', on Ibn Rustah's compositional style and treatment of the subject matter.

there is a readily perceptible contrast in the ease with which Ibn Rustah the *adib*⁸³ describes more familiar straits such as the lands of Islam and especially his home town of Isfahan and the terseness of his report on the Rus. A further source of confusion for our author, depending on what sources he was familiar with, may have been the itinerant nature of the Rus as conveyed by Ibn Khurradadhbih and al-Ya‘qubi, and possibly Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani’s notice where they are absent from the trade route described by Ibn Khurradadhbih.

2.4.2 Al-Mas‘udi

Al-Mas‘udi was born in Baghdad where he received judicial, religious and literary education and enjoyed the tutoring of several notable teachers among which may have been both the celebrated historian al-Tabari (d. 923) and the geographer Abu ‘l-Qasim al-Balkhi (d. 931, cf. below the Balkhi tradition).⁸⁴ Al-Mas‘udi was a prolific writer and polymath, sometimes dubbed the ‘Herodotus of the Arabs’, and took interest in a wide variety of disciplines. Altogether some 36 works attributed to his authorship although only two have endured the ravages of time. For the composition of the monumental *Muruj al-dhbab wa ma‘adin jawbar* in 943 (‘The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Jewels’, henceforth *Muruj al-dhbab*) which he revised, as he did with many of his works, in 947 and 956, he had at his disposal a vast number of sources including Arabic texts, translations of Greek classical authors and Pahlavi texts. Al-Mas‘udi was well read and educated, and his range of source material, both Muslim and not, was vast. He also sought inspiration and material on his extensive travels throughout the Islamic world and some of its adjacent regions, and often applied his own observations to corroborate or refute older data.⁸⁵

Al-Mas‘udi’s accounts of the peoples and places north of the Caucasus constitute a separate strand or strands of information vis à vis the other sources at our disposal. His work contains several passages on the Rus that seem mostly

⁸³ A writer who follows the principles of *adab*.

⁸⁴ C. Pellat, ‘Al-Mas‘udi’, *EI2*, pp. 784–89.

⁸⁵ T. Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas‘udi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), pp. 4–5.

unrelated to the works of his forerunners. No other author provides us with as many different accounts of the Rus, and in the *Muruj al-dhahab* it is possible to distinguish at least ten separate notices. This variety can partially be explained by the sheer volume and scope of Al-Mas'udi's work. His literary net was cast far and wide and thus the Rus appear under various themes:

- 1) In an account of the creation of the world the Rus are counted among the children of Metusalem.⁸⁶
- 2) In a passage on the Black Sea (ar. *Nitash*), Al-Mas'udi relates that according to astronomers this sea belongs to the Bulgars, the Rus, the Pechenegs and the Baskirs.⁸⁷
- 3) In a treatise on the geography of the Caspian Sea and its environs the Rus are said to live on its shores and navigate it.⁸⁸
- 4) In a description of the Khazarian lands, Al-Mas'udi reports that the Rus live there in a quarter of their city (presumably Atil) and gives an account of some of their funerary and judicial customs. According to him, the Rus seem also to have entered the Khazarian army as mercenaries (see translation of this section and further discussion in chapter three).⁸⁹
- 5) A little later the Rus are said to live by and have exclusive access to what appears to be the Azov Sea, although Al-Mas'udi does not call it *bahr Mayntis* as is usual. It is a gulf in the Black Sea (*kehalij min bahr nitas*), into which runs the river of the Khazars (*nahr al-Khazar*), which may here denote the river Don. Al-Mas'udi further notes that they are mighty people who obey no king or law and that among them are

⁸⁶ Al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-dhahab*, ed. and comm. by Abd Al-Amir 'Ali Muhanna, vol. I (Beirut, 1991), p. 45.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 127.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 131–32.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 187–88.

merchants who trade with the Volga Bulgars. It is also related that there is a large silver mine in their region.⁹⁰

- 6) Further on the Rus are said to consist of many different groups, one of which (l.w.dh.‘n.ah) carries out trade with the lands of Al-Andalus⁹¹

- 7) A relatively lengthy passage describes a Rus raid on the southern coastline of the Caspian Sea. Al-Mas‘udi does not inform us of their point of departure other than coming from the Sea of Azov. They arrive via a gulf in the Black Sea⁹² and gain access to the Caspian Sea and obtain the Khazars’ permission to plunder by promising them half of what they amass. Several towns were targeted (Daylam, Gilan, Tabaristan and Abaskun near Jurjan) and the attacks were violent and brutal: ‘the Rus shed blood, captured women and infants, seized properties, they invaded <the towns> and laid them to waste’ (*fa-safakat ar-Rus ad-dima’ wa istibabat an-niswan wa al-wildan wa ghanimat al-amwal wa sbannat al-gharata wa akhrabat*). The Rus carried on with their raids for some time and killed many Muslims. Finally, when the Rus returned to the Khazars to hand over the promised booty, Muslims in the service of the kaghan learned of their atrocities and took revenge. The few Rus that escaped their retaliation fled northwards to the lands of the Burtas and Bulghar where they were killed. This happened, according to Al-Mas‘udi, after the year 912/913.⁹³

- 8) A short notice mentions Rus vessels entering or being blocked from the Bosphorus.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190. This comment may possibly be inspired by the great volume of silver coins carried by the Rus, or their display of this metal as related in Ibn Fadlan’s account (see chapter three, section 3.2).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁹² Again, Al-Mas‘udi does not explicitly mention the Azov Sea (*baḥr Mayūtīs*), although this must be the gulf he is referring to.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

- 9) A short notice referring to no. 4 above mentions Rus living in Khazar lands and their custom of burning the dead on large pyres.⁹⁵
- 10) In a passage on Al-Andalus, Al-Mas'udi describes an attack made from boats carrying thousands of men, whom the locals called *al-majus*, and expresses his belief that these are the same people as the Rus.⁹⁶

The few short references to the Rus in Al-Mas'udi's other surviving work, the *Kitab al-tanbih wa al-isbraf* (The Book of Observation and Instruction) add little to the information in the *Muruj al-dhahab*. There are three notices, two of which connect them with the Black Sea and one which places them in proximity to the Caucasus.⁹⁷ Despite the limitations of Al-Mas'udi's geographical knowledge, which we have already discussed, there is an obvious attempt at placing the Rus in fixed geographical positions. These disparate notices suggest that the writer perceived of several 'pockets' of Rus, which he mostly placed in or near the area corresponding to the southern or central Khazarian lands, and navigated the Black Sea and the Azov, and the Caspian Sea, some time before and during the period in which he compiled his work in the mid-tenth century. The connection with Al-Andalus (item no. 10) resonates with Al-Ya'qubi's notice that the Rus are one and the same as the Majus who raided Seville in 844. The account of the Rus attack on peoples on the south or south-eastern coast of the Caspian Sea is later retold in an expanded version by Ibn Miskawayh (Persian, c. 932–1030), and accounts of this and other Rus raids in this region also feature in several later works.⁹⁸

Al-Mas'udi's notices on the Rus are in some respect more revealing than the account of Ibn Fadlan in that we receive more diverse information – culturally, geographically and probably chronologically – although they are not as 'ethnographically' explicit as the latter's. Perhaps this can be explained by the

⁹⁵ *Muruj al-dhahab*, vol. II, p. 35.

⁹⁶ *Muruj al-dhahab*, vo. I, p. 171. On this word, see our discussion above section 2.2.1.

⁹⁷ Al-Mas'udi, *Kitab al-tanbih wa 'l-isbraf*, pp. 66, 141 and 184.

⁹⁸ Ibn Miskawayh, *Kitab tajarib al-umam wa ta'aqib al-bimam*. Excerpt in H. Birkeland, *Nordens Historie i Middelalderen etter Arabiske Kilder*, pp. 54–58. An overview of other sources is provided by P. B. Golden, 'Rus', pp. 625–26.

distance between Al-Mas'udi and his object of observation whereas Ibn Fadlan, conceiving his description as he did among the Rus, often fails to place his observations in a wider context, unable perhaps, as it were, to see the forest for the trees. At any rate it seems that Al-Mas'udi's passages indicate that before and around the mid-tenth century there existed several groups of Rus subsisting more or less within the Khazarian realm and which were engaged in various different activities. We will further address some of Al-Mas'udi's reports in our discussion of Ibn Fadlan's text in chapter three.

2.4.3 The Balkhi Tradition

The next three authors, Al-Istakhri, Ibn Hawqal and Al-Muqaddasi, have collectively been termed the 'Balkhi school' as they followed the works of Abu Zayd al-Balkhi who died in 934.⁹⁹ Much of the core information contained in the works of these authors is the same. However, they all add their personal touch or style as well as their own interpretations and treatment of the material provided by each author's forebear. Al-Istakhri is mainly responsible for the spreading of the main ideas of the Balkhi school and his work, *Al-Masalik wa 'l-Mamalik*, served as an authentic source of information for the later geographers of this tradition.¹⁰⁰ It was also translated into Persian and became the basis of many geographical works in that language.¹⁰¹

It is believed that Al-Balkhi wrote his geographical work, *Suwar al-aqalim*, which was in the main a commentary to maps, in 920 or shortly after that. It is generally assumed that Al-Istakhri represents a revised and expanded version of the

⁹⁹ Al-Balkhi was a disciple of the famous philosopher al-Kindi (d. 874) who himself wrote at least two works on geography which have not come down to us (D. M. Dunlop, 'Al-Balkhi', p. 1003).

¹⁰⁰ D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, p. 100.

¹⁰¹ F. Taeschner, 'Djughrafiyyah', *EI2*, p. 582.

former's work, which he finalised in around 951.¹⁰² The matter is problematic since nothing of Al-Balkhi's work has survived.¹⁰³

2.4.3.1 Al-Istakhri

In the *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*, Al-Istakhri mentions the Rus on several occasions. Two such references appear in a typical enumerations of Northern peoples which contains a number of names which, somewhat ambiguously, are aimed at clarifying who neighbours whom. Al-Istakhri places the Rus 'between' the Saqalibah and Volga Bulgars and he believes the river Atil (Volga) runs from their land to the Khazars. Al-Istakhri is first among our authors to propose that there are more than one 'kind' (Arab. *sinj*) of Rus, something that appears plausible on account of the evidence from Al-Mas'udi, and he is also first to mention the name Kiev (ar. *Kuyyabal*). Although elements previously connected with the Rus such as their living on an island and their custom of burning the dead are retained, Istakhri's notice seems to represent a more recent 'package' of information, perhaps reflecting the moment in time when Kievan Rus was on the rise.

2.4.3.2 Ibn Hawqal

Ibn Hawqal wrote his *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*/*Kitab surat al-ard* in the second half of the tenth century and most likely finished his work around 988.¹⁰⁴ He was, along with his contemporary Al-Muqaddasi, one of the finest exponents of Islamic geography based on travel and direct observation at the time, and Ibn

¹⁰² H. Birkeland, *Nordens Historie i Middelalderen etter Arabiske Kilder*, p. 26. M. De Goeje suggested that Al-Istakhri's first reworking of Al-Balkhi's text took place in the early 930s (M. De Goeje, 'Die Istakhri-Balkhi Frage', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländische Gesellschaft*, vol. 25 (1871), 42–58 (p. 47).

¹⁰³ See discussion in G. R. Tibbets, 'The Balkhi School of Geographers', p. 109 seq.

¹⁰⁴ A. Miquel, 'Ibn Hawqal', *EI2*, p. 787.

Hawqal's work contains the most voluminous collection of reports on the Rus deriving from the Balkhī tradition.

Ibn Hawqal travelled extensively around the Islamic world until we lose trace of him in 973. This he did possibly as a merchant and a missionary. His main work, which has come down to us, is known under two titles: The *Kitab al-Masalik wa'l-mamalik* and *Kitab Surat al-Ard* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms and The Configuration of the Earth). Four manuscripts of the text have survived of which the MS 3346 at the Old Saray library in Istanbul is the oldest and most complete, dating from 1086, and which forms the basis for de Goeje's edition of Ibn Hawqal's text in the *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*.¹⁰⁵ The main difficulties in using this source arise from its appearance in several consecutive redactions that have severely complicated the task of establishing the history of the text, and from Ibn Hawqal's imitation, or plagiarizing, of al-Istakhri's work.¹⁰⁶ An interesting fact is that al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal met sometime near the end of the former's career when the latter's had just begun, and during which he would presumably benefit much from Al-Istakhri's findings although he does not add much to his reports.¹⁰⁷

Ibn Hawqal includes the Rus in a description of the Caspian Sea region and the Khazars. He mentions that the river flowing into the Caspian Sea is the river of the Rus which is known as Atil/Itil (Arab. *nabr ar-Rus al-ma'ruf bi-Atil*).¹⁰⁸ The Rus are mentioned in the context of trade with the Khazars and Ibn Hawqal also recounts Rus attacks on Bulghar and Khazaran, one of the cities of the Khazars.¹⁰⁹ In a description of the course of the river Atil, it is said to run through the regions of the Rus and then through Bulghar, then to the Burtas and finally emptying into the Caspian Sea.¹¹⁰ In another place Ibn Hawqal seems to differentiate between the regions of the Rus and Kievans (Arab. *bi-nahyat Bulghar*

¹⁰⁵ The other three manuscripts are in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale no. 2214), Oxford (Bodleian MS Huntingdon 538) and (Leiden Cod. Or. 314). An edition of Ibn Hawqal was published by De Goeje in Leiden, 1873, (BGA II). It has now been superseded by that of J. H. Kramers (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

¹⁰⁶ A. Miquel, 'Ibn Hawqal', *IE2*, p. 787.

¹⁰⁷ A. Miquel, 'Al-Istakhri', *IE2*, p. 223.

¹⁰⁸ Ibn Hawqal, *Kitab surat al-ard*, p. 388.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 392.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 393.

wa 'r-Rus wa Kuyabah, 'in the region of Bulghar, Rus and Kiev').¹¹¹ Towards the end of the section, the writer explicitly distinguishes three kinds of Rus, assigning them three different locations: those who neighbour the Bulgars have Kiev, the so-called Slawiya reside in Sla, and the last one is called Arthaniya where Artha is the capital.¹¹² It remains unclear whether Ibn Hawqal had a specific knowledge of these locations, as for example evidenced by his remark on Kiev neighbouring Bulghar, considering that these two locations are separated by approximately 1500 kilometres. This is in keeping with our earlier proposal that the Muslim geographers had little knowledge of the regions north and west of Bulghar. Numerous attempts to identify the two other locations, Sla and Artha, have yielded little but speculation.¹¹³

2.4.3.3 Al-Muqaddasi

Al-Muqaddasi (d. 1000) borrowed, as we have mentioned, quite a lot of information from his predecessors Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal for his own work titled *Absan al-taqasim fi ma'rifat al-aqalim* (The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Climes). This author shows, however, that he himself possesses at least some original knowledge of the peoples and places in question. He particularly excels in comments of a sociological nature relating to customs and languages and in his comparisons of distant regions and cultures. Unfortunately, Al-Muqaddasi took little interest in the northern regions and the whole of his work contains only a solitary sentence devoted to the Rus where he associates them with Byzantium (Arab. *Rum*) in a brief mention of their attack on what is presumably the Khazars.¹¹⁴ He may be referring to a Kievan Rus contingent, grouping them with Byzantium perhaps on account of their common religion, but without further context there is little room for interpretation.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 392.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 297.

¹¹³ See for instance, F. Kmiotowicz, 'Artaniya-Arta', *Folia Orientalia*, vol. 14 (1972–73), 231–60; I. Hrbek, 'Der Dritte Stamm der Rus nach Arabischen Quellen', *Archiv Orientalní*, vol. 25 (1957), 628–53; O. Pritsak, 'The Name of the Third Kind of Rus and of their City', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 1/2 (1967), 2–9.

¹¹⁴ Al-Muqaddasi, *Absan al-taqasim fi ma'rifat al-aqalim*, pp. 360–61.

In sum, the works belonging to the so-called Balkhi tradition contain reports on the Rus that seem in essence to be different to other sources surveyed hitherto. They convey a notion of different groups of Rus, some of which may have resided near the Caspian while others are linked with Kievan Rus or other unknown regions of Eastern Europe.

2.5 Late Tenth Century Accounts

The most important and voluminous accounts of the Rus contained in the Arabic sources belong to approximately the first half of the tenth century, with the exception of Ibn Hawqal's work and the anonymous *Hudud al-Alam* finalised a little later, although both draw significantly on older traditions of Balkhi/Istakhri and Ibn Rustah respectively. Additionally, there are a few passages of interest dated to the latter part of that century.

2.5.1 Al-Turtushi

Ibrahim b. Al-Ya'qub Al-Turtushi was a Jewish merchant and his *nisba* indicates his provenance from the town of Tortosa near the mouth of the Ebro, which in the medieval period had a thriving Jewish community. Around 973 he travelled to central Europe and comments that both the Rus and the Saqalibah bring merchandise such as slaves, silk and furs, to Prague from Krakow. He also states that the Rus raid these lands from the west on their boats. Turtushī proceeds in the usual way to describe who neighbours whom where he places the land between these two cities as bordering on the land of the Turks. He then adds a new dimension to the name *Saqalibah* by enumerating under this term peoples he calls al-Tudishkiyun, al-Unqariyun, al-Bajanakiya, ar-Rus and the Khazars.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ The first two are somewhat emended from the manuscript, see H. Birkeland, *Nordens Historie i Middelalderen etter Arabiske Kilder*, p. 144, fn. 17 and 18.

Turtushi's work has not survived and all that is left of it is a passage in the work of the Cordovan historian and geographer Al-Bakri (1014–1094). This rather short account appears to be an amalgam of somewhat confused notices, interspersed with legend such as the Island of Women, which the author places west of the Rus. We cannot be entirely sure of where exactly he composed his work, and it is possible that terms such as 'east' and 'west' may have ended up somewhat garbled. Al-Turtushi places the Rus east from where he is writing, and we can assume he is referring to Kievan Rus at such a late stage in the tenth century, yet he makes no attempt at differentiating these from other Rus raiding *from* the west.

2.5.2 *Hudud al-Alam*¹¹⁶

Although written in Persian in 982, the anonymous *Hudud al-Alam* (The Regions of the World) is a continuation of the Arabo-Islamic geographies, and draws specifically upon the Jayhani-tradition and the work of Ibn Rustah.¹¹⁷ According to the *Hudud al-Alam* the Rus are said to live east of the Saqalibah and south of the uninhabited lands of the North, that it is a vast country and that the inhabitants whose king he refers to as *Rus-khaqan*, are evil-tempered, warlike and that they war with all the infidels who live in their vicinity. A short comment follows on clothing and burial customs and finally the author lists three of their cities, among them *Kuyabab* (presumably Kiev) which he claims to be the nearest to the Islamic lands by which he could perhaps be referring to the Emirate of Tiflis (736-1080) in modern day Georgia. *Kuyabab* is absent from Ibn Rustah's work from the beginning of the tenth century and Anonymous may have had this information from the Balkhi-tradition or some other source, although the names of two of the locations of the Rus he provides (*S.laba* and *Urtab*) differ somewhat from those of the former.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *Hudud al-Alam*, ed. by V. Minorsky (London: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, 1937) with English translation and extensive commentary.

¹¹⁷ H. Göckenjan and I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*, pp. 35.

¹¹⁸ *Hudud al-Alam*, p. 159, see also V. Minorsky's commentary (pp. 432–38) for attempts at interpreting these placenames.

2.5.3 The *Fibrist* of Ibn Al-Nadim

Al-Nadim's work (see p. 57, fn. 32 for details) contains an interesting passage on the Rus in a part of the book devoted to the scripts employed by various peoples:

A man whose word I trust told me that one of the kings of Mount al-Qabq (the Caucasus) sent him to the king of Russia. He believes that they have writing inscribed on wood, and he showed me a piece of white wood with an inscription on it. The following is an example, but I do not know whether these are words or single letters.¹¹⁹



Figure 3. Ibn Al-Nadim's rendition of a Rus inscription.

No specific location is provided for the Rus and Al-Nadim makes no further mention of them.. The writing-sample looks as most likely composed of Arabic letters, although it is problematic to decipher. Parts of it are perhaps most reminiscent of inscriptions on later Ottoman coins, some of which are written in very crude letters arranged in unusual ways:



Figure 4. Inscription on an Ottoman coin (Tarablus, Mahmud II, r. 1808-1839).

¹¹⁹ *The Fibrist of al-Nadim*, transl. by B. Dodge, p. 37.

We will return to Ibn Al-Nadim's passage in chapter four where we discuss incised Arabic letters on dirham coins that are linked to the trade in which the Rus were active (as well as some pseudo-Arabic patterns that have been found on objects unearthed in Scandinavia).

2.5.4 The *History of Sharvan and Darband*

After the tenth century, it seems that the Rus, as well as the Khazars, all but disappear from the region in which they are most often documented by the Arabic writers.¹²⁰ Faint and scattered memories of them are found in the following centuries but most appear to draw on and refer to works composed in the ninth and tenth centuries. A possible indication of their waning presence near the Caspian Sea is a passage in the Persian *History of Sharvan and Darband* where a small fleet of Rus, at least in comparison to earlier accounts of their raids on the Caspian coast, are said to come to the aid of a local emir Maymun in his internecine strife in the region of Shirvan in eastern Azerbaidjan:

The amir Maymun secretly sought help from the Rus against the "chiefs" and in 987 the Rus arrived in eighteen ships. At first they sent one single ship to see whether the amir was eager to employ them. When they brought the amir out of (his confinement), the people of al-Bab [Darband – T.J.H] in a joint effort massacred the Rus to the last man and the remaining ships sailed on to Masqat and plundered it.¹²¹

There is an overall impression that the Rus were not based too far away, particularly with regard to the single 'probe' ship. Two years later it is reported the Maymun was under pressure from a preacher of the neighbouring Gilan region to surrender his Rus *ghulams* (here probably with the meaning of 'hired soldier'), with the ultimatum that they would be converted to Islam or put to

¹²⁰ See P. B. Golden, 'Rus', p. 626.

¹²¹ *A History of Sharvan and Darband*, ed. and trans. by V. Minorsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 45. The history of this text is quite complex. The extant manuscripts are quite late, yet several events indicate that it may be a faithful record to an extent. The problems are reviewed by V. Minorsky in his introduction to the work (pp. 1–10).

death. Perhaps these accounts reflect the presence of one of the last remaining pockets of those eastern Rus who are reported by Al-Mas'udi to have served as guards to the Khazar kaghan, and resided in Atil.

The third, and final mention of Rus which is contained in the *History of Sharvan and Darband*, dated to 1030, seems to refer to a different group of Rus, attacking Shirvan with thirty-eight ships but who were ultimately defeated on the river Kur. Here we are approaching the traditional dating of the expedition of Yngvarr to the east which is commemorated on several rune stones in Sweden.¹²²

2.6 Later accounts

Alongside the works surveyed here there are a few short notices which mention the Rus in passing. These notices usually contain little further information or context, such as that of Sa'ïd Al-Bitriq who places them 'between' Byzantium and Daylam and the great poet Al-Mutanabbi who mentions the Rus in a poem commemorating a victory attributed to Saif ad-Dawla over the Byzantines in 954. After the eleventh century Arabo-Islamic geography went into decline and the general standard of the works produced was poor compared to those of the classical period with the exception, however, of important exponents such as al-Idrisi and Abu 'l-Fida'. Many of the later works were thus dedicated to resumé, repetitions and recapitulations of material from the early period, and notices on the Rus are no exception to this.¹²³ Although post-tenth century accounts of the Rus are not within our chronological scope here, a few passages in these sources seem to commemorate the Rus-Khazar relationship, with some even classifying the Rus as 'Turk', perhaps on account of their close contacts and prolonged sojourns in Khazaria and Bulghar. Examples of this are the *Mujmal al-Tawarikh*, referring to the Khazars and the Rus as brothers.¹²⁴ The famous geographer Al-Idrisi, writing in the twelfth century, claims that Kiev (*Kuyabab*) is the city of the

¹²² The question whether the report in the *History of Sharvan and Darband* is referring to Yngvarr's failed venture has been examined in depth by J. Shepard, 'Yngvarr's Expedition East and a Russian Stone Cross', *Saga Book*, vol. 21 (1982), 222–92.

¹²³ P. B. Golden, 'Rus', *EI2*, p. 626.

¹²⁴ *Mujmal al-Tawarikh*, anon. (Tehran, 1939).

Turk (see our discussion of this term above) called Rus¹²⁵ and in the following century Al-Qazwini similarly writes that the Rus are a large grouping of the *Turk*.¹²⁶ The renowned historian Ibn Khaldun mentions Rus along with the Volga Bulgars and several other peoples, concluding that they are all Turk tribes.¹²⁷ Sometimes, however, it seems that this name retains little of its earlier meaning, such as when Ibn Khaldun elsewhere informs us of Rus who neighbour Byzantium and converted to Christianity a long time ago, apparently referring to the Kievan Rus.¹²⁸ The notion of connecting the two ethnonyms seems nevertheless to have persisted for some time, as evidenced by Ibn Iyas' writings from the late fifteenth century or early sixteenth century who claims that the Rus are a large grouping of the *Turk*.¹²⁹

2.7 Conclusion

Of the numerous reports and references to the Rus contained in the Arabic material, most of the original material seems to belong to the ninth and tenth centuries, and in particular the first half of the tenth century. In this period the Rus seem to have subsisted in an area sufficiently close and well known to the Muslim geographers to be documented. Their profile may also have been elevated because of their special relationship with the Khazars, who by the late eighth century were of commercial interest to the Caliphate and who also were the only enemy which it had not been able to subdue in successive wars during the seventh and eighth centuries.

The numerous later references should not, however, be entirely disregarded for they often contain interesting modifications and are in themselves a testimony to

¹²⁵ From the *Kitab Rujar* (Book of Roger). P. A. Jaubert, *Géographie d'Édrisi*, 2 vols. (Paris: Société de Géographie, 1836–40), vol. II, p. 401.

¹²⁶ F. Wüstenfeld, *Zakarīja Ben Muḥammed Ben Mahmud el-Cazwīni Kosmographie* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1849), pp. 393–94.

¹²⁷ From J. Seippel, *Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici*, p. 109; H. Birkeland, *Nordens Historie i Middelalderen etter Arabiske Kilder*, pp. 124–25.

¹²⁸ J. Seippel, *Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici*, p. 110; H. Birkeland, *Nordens Historie i Middelalderen etter Arabiske Kilder*, p. 127.

¹²⁹ J. Seippel, *Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici*, p. 113; H. Birkeland, *Nordens Historie i Middelalderen etter Arabiske Kilder*, p. 131.

how the memory of the Rus was preserved and interpreted by later generations of writers.

It was suggested here earlier that the nature and the limitations of the geographical knowledge and perception of the Arabic writers of the regions to the North is a factor that must be seriously taken into account in our interpretations of their descriptions of the Rus. Further, when the Arabic sources are compared they often do not concur on the location of the northern peoples, including the Rus, nor their internal position vis-à-vis each other. However, some rudimentary observations can be made as to what connotations *ar-Rus* may have had for the authors who documented them by juxtaposing them with other names that occur alongside them in the text such as *Saqalibab*. As already discussed this allows us to infer which ethnonyms appear to have been applied more generically and which were applied more specifically. Although this distinction can be made for some text or texts, such as Ibn Khurradadhbih's passage, it should not be applied *grosso modo* to all our texts since the application of these ethnonyms also varied between writers and periods.

All in all, it is possible to distinguish several different 'strands' of accounts of the Rus in the Arabic sources from the ninth and tenth centuries. In accordance with our findings regarding the 'mountain of Rus' in the *Kitab Surat al-Ard* of Al-Khwarazmi, his work is not included in the following list:

1. Ibn Khurradadhbih/Ibn Al-Faqih al-Hamadhani
2. Al-Ya'qubi
3. Ibn Rustah (Jayhani-tradition, Hudud al-Alam, Gardizi et.al.)
4. Ibn Fadlan
5. Al-Mas'udi
6. The Balkhi-tradition (Istakhri, Ibn Hawqal, Al-Muqaddasi)
7. Ibrahim ibn al-Ya'qub al-Turtushi
8. The *History of Shirvan and Darband*

Of these, the majority (1-5, 8 and possibly 6) seems to place the Rus entirely or in part in or near Khazarian lands, on the Azov or the Black Sea or as far north as

the mid-Volga Region, keeping in mind that Ibn Rustah does not provide us with any specific geographical position or toponyms. It is important to note that Al-Mas'udi's works contain numerous separate notices pointing to the Rus in this region.

Only items six and seven appear to reflect a picture of the Rus connected with Kievan Rus which we know from the *Primary Chronicle* and Byzantine and Latin sources. In terms of chronology, Kievan Rus may have entered the Arabic sources at the earliest in the work of Balkhi around 930 and it is first attested in Istakhri's work which was probably composed shortly after that. Before that time there appears to be no mention of this or other toponyms in that region. On the whole, the Rus are presented mainly as merchants. The exceptions to this portrayal are their raids on Seville in the mid-ninth century and their attacks on the southern coastline of the Caspian Sea in the early tenth century, as well as their role as hired soldiers or guards in the Khazar army.

From the above survey there are two authors, Al-Mas'udi and Ibn Fadlan, who clearly stand out as regards the substance and diversity of information in their writings. Yet, these two write from two completely different standpoints; the latter is placed right within their group, the former providing various accounts all of which are external in comparison with Ibn Fadlan's 'inside' viewpoint. This fundamental contrast makes comparison between the two strands of information anything but straightforward. Still, on account of the similarity between both authors' description of the funerary customs of the Rus, it is tempting to assume that they are referring to the same or a kindred group. Moreover, their descriptions are important cases in point of the argument for cultural interaction between the Rus and the Turkic peoples. We will further address the relationship between the two writers' reports in chapter three in our examination of Ibn Fadlan's text.

Chapter 3

Ibn Fadlan's Rus

3.0 Introduction

Central to this study is the account of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, the best known and most extensive and intricate of the Arabic descriptions of the Rus that has survived. Chronologically, Ibn Fadlan's work falls between the early tenth century passages of Ibn Rustah and Ibn Al-Faqih al-Hamadhani and the works of the Balkhi tradition from the middle of that century (Al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal) and Al-Mas'udi's work, importantly providing the only description of the Rus from the precise period in which it is written. It is probably closest in time to the *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisa* of Ibn Rustah which is dated to shortly after 903, and it is possible to identify some similarities between the two authors' depiction of the Rus, although there are important differences as well. In the following we will observe some characteristics and background of the text, and examine the passages on the Rus. The main section of this chapter examines Ibn Fadlan's lengthy description of a funerary ritual among the Rus and considers on the one hand the ceremony's cultural 'orientation' and on the other hand its role and meaning for Rus identity.

3.1 The Author and his Text¹

On 21 June 921 Ahmad Ibn Fadlan departed as a member of a delegation from the court of Caliph Al-Muqtadir in Baghdad (r. from 908 to 932), which destination was the realm of the Volga Bulgars thousands of kilometres to the north on the confluence of the rivers Volga and Kama. The inducement for this dispatch was a letter from Almish b. Shilki, the king (Arab. *malik*)² of the Volga Bulgars, in which he petitioned the Caliph to

send to him those who could instruct him in religious jurisprudence and could acquaint him with the religious codes of Islam, who could construct a mosque for him and erect a mimbar from which he could proclaim the call in his [i.e., of the caliph al-Muqtadir] name in his land and all his kingdom, and petitioned him to build a fort in which he might fortify himself against the kings who opposed him.³

Apparently, the Volga Bulgars had already converted to Islam and had a mosque of some kind. The construction of a fort mentioned in the letter to the Caliph

¹ Several editions and translations have been made. In German: C. M. Fraehn, *Ibn Fozlans und andere Araber Berichte über die Russen älterer Zeit* (St Petersburg: Buchdruckerei der Akademie, 1823), and A. Zeki Velidi Togan, *Ibn Fadlan's Reisebericht*, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, vol. 24, nr. 3 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1939); in Russian: A. P. Kovalevskii, *Kniga Akhmeda Ibn Fadlana o ego putestestvii na Volgu 921–2* (Kharkiv: Izdatelstvo Gos. Universiteta, 1956); in French: M. Canard, *La Relation du Voyage d'Ibn Fadlan chez les Bulgares*, Annales De L'institut d'Etudes Orientales, no 5 (1958), 41–146; Danish (partial): J. B. Simonsen, *Vikingerne ved Volga / Ibn Fadlans rejsebeskrivelse* (Højberg: Wormianum, 1997); in Polish: *Źródła arabskie do dziejów Słowiańszczyzny* (series), ed. by A. Kmietowicz, F. Kmietowicz and T. Lewicki (Wrocław: Zakład im. Ossolińskich, 1956–1988); and in English: R. N. Frye (basing himself mostly on the translation in J. E. McKeithen's PhD thesis, *The Risalah of Ibn Fadlan: An Annotated Translation with Introduction*, Indiana University, 1979), *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2005); *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. and trans. by J.E. Montgomery (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming in the *Library of Arabic Literature*) and most recently, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, trans. and intr. by P. Lunde and C. Stone (London: Penguin, 2012). The passages quoted in this chapter are from J. Montgomery's translation, and the pagination here refers to Montgomery's translation and the edition of Sami Dahhan, (Damascus: al-Majma' al-'Ilmi al-'Arabi bi-Dimashq, 1959) on which it is based. Ibn Fadlan's account is henceforth referred to as *Risalah* which is an abbreviation of its full title in Dahhan's edition: *Risalat Ibn Fadlan fi wasf 'al-rihlab 'ila bilad 'al-Turk wa-'al-Khazar wa-'al-Rus wa-'al-Saqalibah sanat 309 H / 921 M* [The treatise of Ibn Fadlan, a description of the journey to the land of the Turks, the Khazars, the Rus and the Saqalibah in the year 309 of the Hejira/921 C.E.].

² Ibn Fadlan refers later to the ruler of the Volga Bulgars as *yltavar*, presumably an Arabic rendition of the Turkic title *elteber* (see chapter 2, p. 65, fn. 52).

³ *Risalah*, p. 65, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. and trans. by J. E. Montgomery (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

was according to the ruler of the Volga Bulgars intended as a means to counter the Khazar dominion, of which we catch a glimpse later in the text.⁴

As to the political meaning of the Caliph's gesture it has been suggested that further bonding with the Muslim Volga Bulgars could have been a way of countering an anti-Sunni sentiment within the Caliphate and to support the Samanid emirs of Transoxania in order to secure the trade between Khwarazm and the mid-Volga region.⁵ It is important to note in this context that from the end of the ninth century onwards the northbound trade from the Caliphate had more or less ceased to lead through Khazaria as it did before. Instead it now lay east of the Caspian, an arduous journey of many months on camelback across Khwarazm and the arid plateau of the Ust-Yurt.⁶

The first legs of the journey traversed the better known and well-trodden Khurasan trade route which in turn made up one stretch of the Silk road. Ibn Fadlan's itinerary is rather well known although some of the toponyms appearing in his account have not yet been successfully deciphered (see fig. 1 for Ibn Fadlan's itinerary).⁷

⁴ *Risalah*, p. 118, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming): "Incumbent upon the King of the Saqalibah [i.e. the *yltanar*] is a tax which he pays to the King of the Khazar: one sable skin from every tent in his kingdom." And, "The son of the King of the Saqalibah is held hostage by the King of the Khazar. The King of the Khazar had heard of the beauty of the daughter of the King of the Saqalibah, so he sent to ask for her hand in marriage, but he objected and refused him. He sent some troops and took her by force, though he is a Jew and she a Muslim. She died at his court, so he sent to demand another of his daughters" (*ibid*). See also T. Sass and M. L. Warmind, 'Mission Saqaliba', *Chaos*, vol. 11 (1989), 31–49 (pp. 39–40).

⁵ C. E. Bosworth, 'Ahmad. b. Fazlan', *Eir*, vol. I, p. 640. On the Volga Bulgars and their contacts and adoption of Islam see I. Zimonyi's two studies: *The Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, Studia Uralo–Altaica, no. 32 (Szeged: Attila József University, 1990), and 'Volga Bulgars and Islam', *Islamkundliche Untersuchungen*, Baumberger Zentralasienstudien, vol. 185 (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1994), 235–40. Also, I. Hrbek, 'Bulghar', pp. 1304–8.

⁶ T. S. Noonan, 'Volga Bulgharia's Tenth-century Trade with Samanid Central Asia', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, vol. 11 (2000–2001), 140–338, (p. 140): "Volga Bulgharia's tenth century trade with Samanid Central Asia [...] marks the zenith of Islamic commerce with northern Europe. The ninth-century Islamic trade, while substantial, was only a fraction of that which took place in the tenth century while this commerce experienced a sharp decline during the eleventh century." See also R. Kovalev, 'Dirham Mint Output of Samanid Samarqand and its Connection to the Beginnings of Trade with Northern Europe (10th century)', *Histoire et Mesure* [Monnaie et espace], vol. 17, no. 3–4 (2002), 197–216.

⁷ On the itinerary and the circumstances of the journey see R. N. Frye, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*, pp. 13–20 and 97.

We know alas next to nothing about Ibn Fadlan himself apart what can be extracted from the text.⁸ His role in the embassy seems nevertheless to have been of considerable responsibility and he communicated directly with the ruler of the Volga Bulgars on matters related to its official task. It suffices to say that the embassy itself was a failure. The money was not delivered, and the ‘correction’ of the Bulghar practice of Islam did not go over smoothly.⁹ Ibn Fadlan does not dwell on those issues however, and apart from the first days in Bulghar territory he rarely mentions the embassy’s original purpose. Instead, the account takes a rather different turn - a much more interesting one for modern scholarship as it has turned out - as its greater part is devoted to descriptions of ethnographic nature of the Bulghar and their neighbours and the Rus. This unusual or uneven composition of the text has been interpreted as a reflection of Ibn Fadlan’s experience of the journey. Maria Kowalska suggested that the account’s chronology is a compositional device: the route up to Bulghar and the first days of the embassy’s sojourn are carefully registered in this regard whereas for the following events it seems as if time has ceased to exist.¹⁰

⁸ On the few biographical details attributed to him see M. Canard, ‘Ibn Fadlan’, *EI2*, p. 759; R. N. Frye, *Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia*, pp. 13–20.

⁹ *Risalah*, p. 118–121.

¹⁰ M. Kowalska, ‘Ibn Fadlan’s Account of His Journey to the State of the Bulgars’, *Folia Orientalia*, vol. 14 (1972–1973), 219–30 (p. 224).

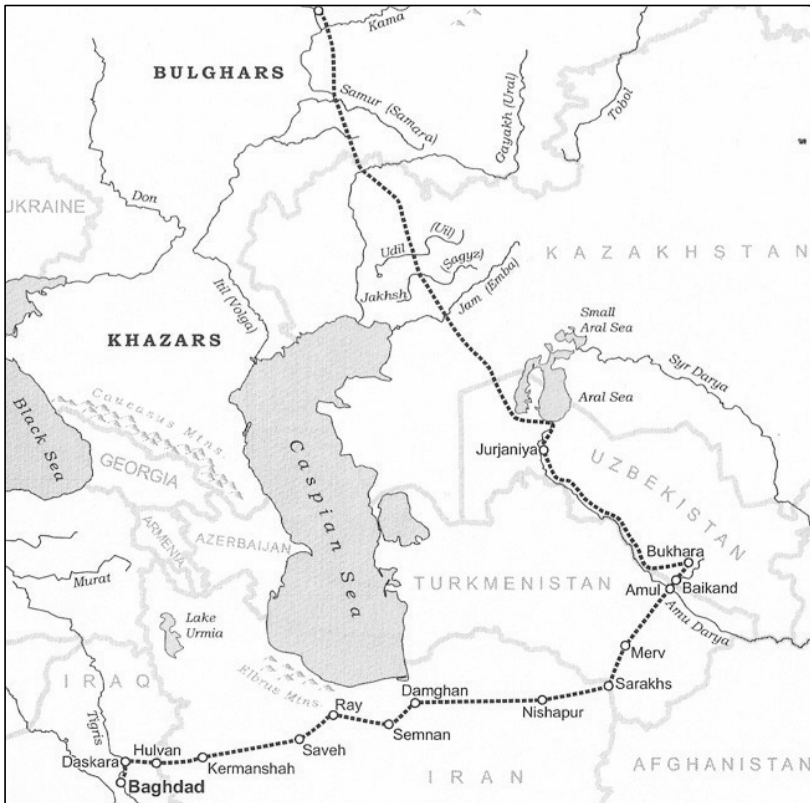


Figure 5. Ibn Fadlan's route from Baghdad to Bulghar on the Volga just south of modern Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan (from R. N. Frye, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*, p. 12).

Up until the discovery by the Bashkir scholar Ahmed-Zeki Validi Togan of a new manuscript of Ibn Fadlan's *Risalah* in 1923 in Mashhad in N-Iran, it was only known through the excerpts found in the early thirteenth century geographical compendium of Yaqut Al-Hamawi, the *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, which were later copied with slight reworking by the Persian scholar Amin Razi in the sixteenth century.¹¹

¹¹ The fact that the manuscript was found east of the Caspian, and that Yaqut also accessed his source there, may indicate that there were several in circulation in this region. If this was the case, they may have been destroyed with the Mongol invasion into Central Asia around 1220. It is not far-fetched that Jayhani, the Samanid emir at Bukhara whom Ibn Fadlan met, would have received a copy too, known as he was for his endeavours to collect such accounts (Cf. I. Zimonyi and H. Göckenjan, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*, pp. 1–22). Perhaps Jayhani's collection also contributed at some point to Ibn Fadlan's text, either through a copyist or Ibn Fadlan himself. We are told that he stayed in Bukhara on his northbound journey, and it is possible that he did so as well on his return to Baghdad, that is if he made it at all since no record of it has survived. In his commentary, R. Frye suggested that the manuscript belonged to a compilation of geographical texts made for a Turkic ruler, perhaps of

The Mashhad manuscript contains a more complete version of the account than either Yaqut al-Hamawi or Amin Razi, and editions and translations produced since its discovery are mostly based on it. Even though this source is often counted among the works of Arabic geographical literature¹² it cannot be said to belong to either school of method discussed above in chapter two and remains in fact without parallel in the period in which it was written. Ibn Fadlan makes neither an attempt to describe the world as a whole, nor to include the realms of the Caliphate in its entirety. His account is essentially a travelogue (Ar. *rihla*), one that has left us one of the exceedingly few eyewitness accounts of the composition of peoples and forces in the Eurasian Steppe region between the time of Herodotus and the Dominican and Franciscan missions to the Mongols in the thirteenth century.¹³ This type of literature became more popular among Muslim writers at a later stage with famous travel-writers such as Abu Hamid Al-Gharnati (twelfth century), Ibn Jubayr (twelfth to thirteenth century), Ibn Battuta (fourteenth century) and their accounts of wonders (Arab. *aja'ib*).

However, Ibn Fadlan's account is unique in more ways than being atypical genre for its period. First, there is little we can trace in the way of literary precedents or tradition upon which Ibn Fadlan may have drawn for models or inspiration. With the exception of a few Quranic references, and possibly on one occasion to the Greek or Graeco-Arabic tradition, his account does not seem to relate to or base itself on any other known text.¹⁴ Considering the occasional fantastical description and the account's overall lack of uniformity, it is furthermore improbable that the text, as it has come down to us, was intended as an official report intended for the chancellery in Baghdad.¹⁵

the Qarakhanids who reigned in Central Asia a century after Ibn Fadlan's journey (R. Frye, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*, p. 81).

¹² As by C. Brockelmann in GAL, p. 261.

¹³ J. E. McKeithen, *The Risalah of Ibn Fadlan*, p. 3.

¹⁴ J. E. Montgomery ('Travelling Autopsies: Ibn Fadlan and the Bulghar', *Middle Eastern Literatures*, vol. 7, no 1 (2004), 3–32 (p. 15)) points out lexical parallels in Ibn Fadlan's description of the spectral armies that may indicate affinity with Arabic translations of Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, more specifically with that of Olympiodorus (*Tafsir al-Mufidurus*). On the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement see chapter two.

¹⁵ See M. Kowalska, 'Ibn Fadlan's Account of His Journey to the State of the Bulgars', p. 220, although T. Sass and M. L. Warmind are of the opinion that it is an official report ('Mission Saqaliba', p. 32). It may in any case have been intended for the caliphal courtly audience in Baghdad as suggested by A. P. Kovalevskii, *Kniga Akhmeda Ibn Fadlana o ego puteshestvii na Volgu 921–2*, p. 48.

Given the need for preparations for such an expedition and Ibn Fadlan's connection with the courtly circles, we can still assume that he had at least rudimentary knowledge of the works of earlier writers on the northern regions, such as Ibn Khurradadhbih's *Kitab al-masalik wa'l-mamalik* (the Book of Highways and Kingdoms), Tabari's *Tarikh al-Rusul wa'l-muluk* (the History of Prophets and Kings), Ibn Rustah's *Kitab al-a'laq al-nafisa* (the Book of Precious Objects) or Ya'qubi's *Kitab al-Buldan* (the Book of Lands).¹⁶ He may even have heard of the Rus before he embarked on the journey as they feature in all these works apart from Tabari's. Possibly he also obtained information from reports, oral or written, that have not come down to us.

Another unusual feature of Ibn Fadlan's relation is that he himself occupies a central position as can be evidenced linguistically through his first-person narrative, but also in that we are very much aware of his personality in his observations and on several occasions he is quite expressive regarding his own emotions.¹⁷ This is evident throughout the account, but culminates in his well-known description of a Rus funerary ritual and several supernatural phenomena. The intimate involvement of his persona gives rise to some curious moments in the text; why, for example, in a heated discussion with the *yltawar* on legal matters concerning the failure to deliver the promised sum of money, does Ibn Fadlan portray himself, a delegate from the Caliph in Baghdad, so intellectually inferior to the king of the Volga Bulgars, a mostly infidel and barbaric northern people from the point of view of a Muslim?¹⁸ We may attempt to explain this as an effort to underscore the Kings readiness to accept Islam, but we run immediately

¹⁶ Al-Ya'qubi's tractate on the north has not come down to us but may have existed in Ibn Fadlan's time. See chapter two for discussion of these works.

¹⁷ For example when commenting on the physical hardship he experienced on the journey: "Then we plunged deep into the territory of the Turk and did not turn aside for any reason (and we encountered no one) through a bare, mountainless desert. We crossed it for ten days and what we suffered in the way of bodily harm, exhaustion, severe cold, and perpetual snow-storms was such as to make the cold of Khwarazm resemble the days of summer by comparison: we forgot all that had happened to us previously and were on the point of giving up the ghost" (*Risalah*, p. 89, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming)). Ibn Fadlan also describes his trepidation resulting from his dealings with the *yltawar*: "I left his presence, dazed, in a state of terror, for he was a man whose mien commanded respect, corpulent and large, who seemed to speak from inside a barrel" (*Risalah*, p. 120, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming)). For further discussion of this aspect of the text see M. Kowalska, 'Ibn Fadlan's Account of His Journey to the State of the Bulgars', p. 222.

¹⁸ *Risalah*, pp. 119–20.

into problems because in the following passage he describes the King's abuse of the call to prayer.¹⁹

Indeed the account is rife with odd things. We come across a giant's bones, snakes as large as trees and rhinoceros, to name a few. Some of these, such as the rhinoceros and the analogy of snakes and tree trunks, are found in earlier Arabic literature but as elaborately demonstrated by James Montgomery, Ibn Fadlan's phenomena cannot be connected unequivocally with any of them.²⁰ Part of the reason, it seems, is that Ibn Fadlan not only described what he saw, he also relied on the oral information of informants and interpreters during his travels and sojourn in Bulghar. It is furthermore evident that Ibn Fadlan possessed literary talent, and he creates an intensely dynamic narrative with an acute sense of timing, drama and humour. This does not entail that his descriptions are necessarily fictitious, nor does his position as an eyewitness have to mean that they are unembellished. Montgomery views the narrative as "consciously restrained" which, while certainly not hesitating to underscore the cultural and religious superiority of Islam, does not dwell on prurient extravagance. "The account is not, with minor exceptions, a fusion of tall tales appropriate to a male assembly, the audience which proved very influential in shaping so much of the Arabic narrative style in the classical period, but is passably 'ethnographic' observation, generally divested of rhetorical filigree and of the propensity for risqué elaboration and the fantastic."²¹ It is above all problematic to provide a single definition or qualification to coherently cater for the whole of Ibn Fadlan's text, and each element needs to be analysed on its own.²²

¹⁹ *Risalah*, pp. 120–21.

²⁰ J. E. Montgomery, 'Travelling Autopsies: Ibn Fadlan and the Bulghar', pp. 10–13.

²¹ *Idem*, 'Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* vol III (2000), 1–25 (p. 25).

²² On those parts of the account not especially dealt with here see Togan's commentary on his translation (*Ibn Fozlans und andere Araber Berichte über die Russen älterer Zeit*, and the works mentioned in fn. 1, p. 93 above; J. E. Montgomery, 'Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah', pp. 1–25; *idem*, 'Travelling Autopsies: Ibn Fadlan and the Bulghar', pp. 4–32; and 'Spectral Armies, Snakes, and a Giant from Gog and Magog: Ibn Fadlan as Eyewitness among the Volga Bulghars', *The Medieval History Journal*, no. 9 (2006), 63–87; and the prefatory notes and commentaries in Marius Canard, *Voyage chez les Bulgares de la Volga* (Paris: Papyrus, 1983) and R. N. Frye, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*.

3.2 The Rus passages

The section on the Rus²³ immediately follows the account on the Bulghar and their land, and seems to take place on their territory, at least we are not informed of any physical movement away from it. We can divide it into four main themes appearing in the following order:

i) Physical appearance and garb of the Rus, with which our observer is quite impressed:

I saw the Rusiyyah when they had arrived on their trading expeditions and had disembarked at the River Itil. I have never seen more perfect physiques than theirs – they are like palm trees, are fair and reddish, and do not wear the tunic or the caftan. The man wears a cloak with which he covers one half of his body, leaving one of his arms uncovered. Every one of them carries an axe, a sword and a dagger and all of that which we have mentioned never parts from him. Their swords are Frankish, with broad, ridged blades. Each man, from the tip of his toes to his neck, is covered in dark lines: trees, pictures and such like. Each woman has, on her breast, a small disc, tied around her neck, made of either iron, silver, copper or gold, in relation to her husband's financial and social worth. Each disc has a ring to which a dagger is attached, also lying on her breast. Around their necks they wear hoops of gold and silver: whenever a man possesses ten thousand dirhams, he has a hoop made for his wife; if he possesses twenty thousand dirhams, he has two hoops made for her – for every ten thousand more, he gives another hoop to his wife. Sometimes one woman may wear many hoops around her neck.²⁴

ii) Hygiene and sexual mores, with which Ibn Fadlan is considerably less impressed:

They are the filthiest of all Allah's creatures: they do not purify themselves after excreting or urinating or wash themselves when in a state of ritual impurity after coitus and do not even wash their hands after food. Indeed they are like the asses which err.²⁵

...

They are accompanied by beautiful slave-girls for trading. One man will have intercourse with his slave-girl while his companion looks on. Sometimes a group of them comes together to do this, each in front of the other. Sometimes the merchant comes into their presence to buy a slave-girl from one of them and he will chance upon him having

²³ Ibn Fadlan refers to them interchangeably as Rus and Rusiyyah.

²⁴ *Risalab*, pp. 149–50, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

²⁵ *Risalab*, p. 151, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

intercourse with her, but the Rus will not leave her alone until he has satisfied his urge.²⁶

...

Every day the slave-girl arrives in the morning with a large basin containing water, which she hands to her master. He washes his hands and his face and the hair on his head in the water, then he dips his comb in the water and brushes his hair, blows his nose and spits in the basin. There is no filthy impurity which he will not do in that water. When he no longer requires it, the slave-girl takes the basin to the man beside him and he goes through the same routine as his comrade. She continues to carry it from one man to the next until she has gone round everyone in the house, with each of them blowing his nose and spitting, washing his face and hair in the basin.²⁷

iii) Their custom of erecting their idols and sacrificing to them, expressly for helping them to make a quick sell for a good price:

Lord, I have come from a distant land, bringing such and such a number of slave-girls and such and such a number of sable pelts. He continues until he has mentioned all of the merchandise he has brought with him, then says, "And I have brought this offering", leaving what he has brought with him in front of the piece of wood, saying, "I wish you to provide me with a merchant who has many dinars and dirhams and who will buy from me whatever I want without haggling over the price I fix."²⁸

This description is to some extent consistent with accounts by other Muslim writers who predominantly portray the Rus as traders. The golden neck-rings carried by Rus women and their correspondence with the accumulated wealth of their husbands as measured in tens of thousands of dirham silver coins is indicative of the Rus involvement in, and the magnitude of, trade in this place and period. Their formidable appearance, weapons and decorated bodies, may reflect the level of danger posed by the environment and possibly the trade itself in which they participated, and can also be related to reports that on occasions they undertook plundering themselves (see further discussion on violence and brutality among the Rus and the near-contemporaneous Caspian raids below). We also

²⁶ *Risalah*, p. 151, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

²⁷ *Risalah*, pp. 151–52, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

²⁸ *Risalah*, p. 152, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming). See T. Sass and M. L. Warmind, 'Mission Saqaliba', pp. 39–40. They point out the absence of the formula "I saw" (Arab. *ra'aytu*), employed by Ibn Fadlan on other occasions, and infer that this was second-hand information obtained from an informant or the interpreter. That may be so, notwithstanding that Ibn Fadlan does at times oscillate between first and third person narrative.

have evidence from Ibn Rustah portraying Rus society as internally violent, where in-fighting was common and the need to stay alert was dire.²⁹

Their swords here described as Frankish points to the Rus' connection with other trade routes which we shall discuss in chapter four.³⁰ Ibn Rustah claims a decade or so earlier (keeping in mind that his material may stem from an earlier period, possibly the second half of the ninth century) that their swords are of a 'Sulaymani' type without further elaboration however. This discrepancy may possibly indicate to us that the writers were describing two different groups of Rus, or simply that the Rus used two different kinds of swords. What this difference entailed, apart from their weaponry, is not clear but the idea of several 'pockets' of Rus is evident in the Arabic source material especially with the exponents of the Balkhi tradition, Al-Mas'udi and the Persian *Hudud al-Alam*.

The lack of hygiene and sexual discretion is diametrically opposed to the rigidly enforced principles regarding these elements within the Islamic culture³¹ and Ibn Fadlan's repulsion to certain Rus customs is on a par with his disgust towards those of the Ghuzz, Pechenegs and Bashkirs whom he encounters on his way to Bulghar.³²

The custom of erecting idols may be compared with Scandinavian practices,³³ and we are informed these idols are a tall piece of wood having "a face like the face of

²⁹ "None of them answers the call of nature except he is followed by three of his kinsmen who watch over him. Each of them carries his sword because security is scarce and betrayal is common among them. And when a man has possessions, his brother and an accompanying kinsman may fall on him and plunder his belongings." (Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisab*, p. 130). Frankish swords were widespread in medieval Europe, see A. N. Kirpichnikov, 'Connections between Russia and Scandinavia in the 9th and 10th Centuries, as Illustrated by Weapon Finds', in *Varangian Problems*, Scando-Slavica Supplementum I (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1970), pp. 50–76 (pp. 60–61).

³¹ For discussion and examples see A. Al-Azmeh, 'Barbarians in Arab Eyes', pp. 5–6, and also chapter two above where ethnography or human geography in the Arabic historical and geographical literature are discussed.

³² *Risalah*, pp. 86–109. In fact he employs verbatim the same phrase for the Ghuzz ('they are like the asses which err', p. 91).

³³ For instance such as described in *Kjalnesinga saga* where one Þorgrímur built a temple at Hof, one hundred feet long and sixty feet wide with windows and wall hangings everywhere, and in the middle the hall an image of Þórr, with other gods on either side (*Kjalnesinga Saga*, ed. by B. Halldórsson, J. Torfason, S. Tómasson and Ö. Thorsson (Reykjavík: Svart á hvítu, 1986), chapter 2, p. 1438.

a man and is surrounded by small figurines behind which are long pieces of wood set up in the ground.”³⁴

It is unfortunate that Ibn Fadlan took no interest whatsoever in the language of the Rus, for example during his observation of this custom. This is however commonly the case in ethnographies of the period: languages may be described in terms of how they sound, not infrequently in comparison with various animals.³⁵ Utterances in a non-Arabic languages have rarely been preserved in this literature.

On the whole, the description provided by Ibn Fadlan on these aspects of Rus culture provides somewhat general information. Two items can be regarded as more specific in terms of having a well known reference and those are their Frankish swords and their possession of a large number of dirhams, although neither element is in fact surprising since we already know that the Rus were greatly involved in trade in these parts.

So far in this part of the description our narrator seems to be in control of his account and his observations are indeed not very different from the typical passages on barbarian peoples among other Muslim writers. He emphasises their outlandish behaviour, which is in stark contrast with his culturally ‘superior’ origins and manages to move quite systematically from one theme to another, allotting them a reasonably consistent space in his account. This confident posture is severely shaken, however, in the last portion of the description of the Rus,³⁶ which relates the funerary ritual and cremation of one of their nobles. Ibn Fadlan describes in considerable detail the necessary preparations for the ritual, including the construction of the pyre and the chieftain’s preliminary grave and the sowing of the funerary garments. The author seems to be imparting information both through his own observations as well as what he gathers from

³⁴ *Risalah*, p. 153, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

³⁵ For example in Ibn Fadlan’s description of the people of Khwarazm: “They are the most outlandish of people in both speech and nature. Their speech resembles, above all else, the call of the starling and there is a village one day distant called Ardakuwa, the inhabitants of which are called al-Kardaliyyah, whose speech resembles, above all else, the croaking of frogs.” (*Risalah*, p. 82, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

³⁶ After Ibn Fadlan’s description of the funerary ritual, there is a notice on the king of the Rus which we shall address in chapter five along with our discussion of the question of a Rus kaghanate.

his 'guide', such as the differences in burial rites depending on economic and social status:

...in the case of a poor man, they make a small boat for him, place him inside and burn it. In the case of a rich man, they gather together his possessions and divide them into three portions, one third for his household, one third with which to cut funeral garments for him, and one third with which they ferment alcohol which they drink on the day when his slave-girl kills herself and is burned together with her master.³⁷

Next follows a description of the procedure in which the slave-girl is selected. The group of slave-girls or concubines (Arab. *jariyah*) and slave-boys (*ghulam*) are asked to volunteer to die with the deceased master, and once one of them has consented it was not possible to change that decision. Apparently, both girls and boys could offer themselves in this way, but Ibn Fadlan notes that it is usually slave-girls who do this. From this moment until her eventual demise at the end of an elaborate and horrific ceremony, the girl is attended to especially by her fellow *jariyahs* who accompany her everywhere and wash her feet and every day she participates in drinking and merry singing.³⁸

On the day when the ritual was to take place, Ibn Fadlan describes the ceremonial setting with a certain awe as the chieftain's ship has been beached and placed upon huge piles of wood. On board the boat a couch has been placed, covered with brocade and cushions of Byzantine silk. As these final preparations are being carried out, Ibn Fadlan introduces the coordinator or supervisor of the ceremony, whom the Rus call 'the Angel of Death' (Arab. *malak al-mawt*), "responsible for the sewing of his garments and setting him in order and it is she who kills the concubines. I saw her myself: a gloomy, corpulent woman, neither young nor old."³⁹

Next, the dead chieftain is exhumed from his temporary grave and dressed in his funerary garments, "trousers, leggings, boots, a tunic, and a silk caftan with golden buttons, and placed a peaked silk cap fringed with sable on his head." He is then carried inside a tent that had been raised on the ship and is laid to rest on

³⁷ *Risalah*, p. 155, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

³⁸ *Risalah*, p. 156.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

the couch and the cushions that have been arranged for him. An idea of the man's status may be gleaned from the unsparing offerings placed with him on the ship:

Then they brought the alcohol, fruit and sweet basil and placed them beside him. Next they brought bread, meat and onions which they cast in front of him. They brought a dog and cut it in two and threw it onto the ship. Then they brought all of his weaponry and they placed it beside him. Then they took two horses and made them gallop until they began to sweat, cut them up into pieces with the sword and threw the flesh onto the ship. They next brought two cows, then cut them up into pieces also and threw them on board. They then produced a cock and a hen, killed them and cast them onto it.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the *jariyab's* role has changed from merry singing and drinking to orgiastic relations with the so-called 'lords of the tent', who curiously proclaim, while having intercourse with her, that she should tell her master that they have done so purely out of love for her. This procedure seems to mark the final phase before the actual funerary ritual begins in earnest:

At the time of the evening prayer on the day of congregation [Friday] they brought the slave-girl to a thing which they had made, like a door-frame. She placed her feet on the hands of the men and appeared above that door-frame. She said some words and they brought her down. Then they lifted her up a second time and she did as she had done the first time. Then they brought her down and then lifted her up a third time and she did as she had done on the other two occasions. Then they handed her a hen. She cut off its head and threw it away. They took the hen and threw it on board the ship. So I quizzed the interpreter about her actions and he said, "The first time they lifted her, she said, 'Behold, I see my father and my mother'. The second time she said, 'Behold, I see all of my dead kindred, seated'. The third time she said, 'Behold, I see my master, seated in Paradise. Paradise is beautiful and verdant. He is accompanied by his men and his retainers. He summons me, so bring me to him'". So they brought her toward the ship and she removed two bracelets which she was wearing, handing them to the woman called the 'Angel of Death', the one who would kill her. She also removed two anklets which she was wearing, handing them to the two slave-girls who had waited upon her: they were the daughters of the woman known as the 'Angel of Death'. Then they lifted her onto the ship but did not bring her into the tent. The men came with their shields and sticks and handed her a beaker of alcohol over which she sang and then drank. The interpreter said to me, "Thereby she bids her female comrades farewell". She was handed another beaker, which she took and chanted for a long time, while the crone urged her to drink it and to enter the tent in which her master lay. I saw that she was befuddled and wanted to enter the tent but she had put her head between the tent and the ship. The crone grabbed hold of her head and brought her into the tent, entering it

⁴⁰ *Risalah*, p. 159, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

with her. The men began to bang their shields with the sticks so that the sound of her screaming could not be heard and so terrify the other slave-girls who would not, then, seek to die with their masters.

Six men entered the tent and all had intercourse with the slave-girl. Then they laid her down by the side of her master and two of them took hold of her feet, two her hands. The crone called the 'Angel of Death' placed a rope around her neck in such a way that the ends crossed one another and handed it to two of the men to pull on it. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in and out between her ribs, now here, now there, while the two men throttled her with the rope until she died.⁴¹

Finally, the deceased's (presumably the chieftain's) nearest male relative takes charge of igniting the pyre, but not without the utmost precaution of the spiritually charged circumstances, naked, walking backwards holding the torch with one hand and the other covering his anus. Once he had put fire to the mound, other people present at the ceremony contribute to the cremation by throwing sticks and firewood onto the fire, and soon the ship, the master and the *jariyah* were engulfed by the flames.⁴²

In a short while, all had been burnt to fine ash and some kind of a mound was erected where the ship had been. Before leaving the scene of the ceremony, the Rus wrote the name of the man (the chieftain) and the name of the King of the Rus on a piece of wood, and placed it on the mound.⁴³

There are several important contrasts between this passage and those dwelling on themes i-iii of Ibn Fadlan's account itemised above. First of all it is longer than all of them combined, and makes for about sixty per cent of the entire section of the *Risalah* devoted to the Rus. It is not difficult to imagine that this results from the enormity of the spectacle, having a profound impact on our writer with its grotesque unfolding of events. Interestingly, Ibn Fadlan seems to have abandoned his typically 'ethnographic' perspective, and appears to be completely absorbed in what goes on in front of him. His guards have dropped and we can no longer detect the high-culture take on barbarous customs, or Muslim versus the unconverted, so evident throughout the text up until this point. The description of the Rus' unorthodox methods, the ritual's violence and gore, now

⁴¹ *Risalah*, pp. 170–72, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

⁴² *Risalah*, pp. 172–73.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 165.

flows freely without the constant implicit or explicit presence of and comparison with Ibn Fadlan's own 'home culture' standards. Montgomery points out that the passage conveys an impression of being detached and having an almost scientific character "eschewing by and large, the improbable, and blatantly fictitious, blemishes which loom all too large in the majority of the accounts of foreigners and foreign lands found in Arabic geographical and travel works."⁴⁴

Regarding the composition of the account, it is possible that it was redacted at some point after the events it described. It may have retained the most salient elements but, in keeping with the aforementioned signs of its author's literary adeptness, may have required some rearranging. Above we mentioned the problem of identifying any literary texts or traditions that could have influenced Ibn Fadlan and that the only positively identifiable element stems from the Greco-Arabic tradition. Thus suggesting a model for his description of the ritual will seem contrived, but for the sake of argument we shall examine one possibility in that vein.

Walter Burkert, an authority on Greek religion, devised a model conveying the essential elements of a sacrificial ritual which, when compared with Ibn Fadlan's description, offers some identifiable similarities. In the Greek tradition, an unwilling animal was seen as a bad omen and thus water was sprinkled over its head to procure an impression of a requisite nod. The same effect would be achieved through the girl's merriment and incessant consumption of alcohol, providing bystanders with the impression of her consent. Here the physical distance of the actual event from the uninitiated observers may have played a role, and Ibn Fadlan may have been situated too close and accidentally seen 'too much' when the poor girl starts to veer from her intended target on the boat, presumably realising what was about to happen through her inebriate confusion. Another parallel may be found in the noise created by shields and sticks and the high pitch utterance at precisely the same point in the Greek and the Rus ritual, both having the dual function of eliminating 'unpleasant' sounds emanating from the victim, and symbolising the passing on from living to dying.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ J. E. Montgomery, 'Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyah', p. 18.

⁴⁵ W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 199.

Another correlation with Burkert's model is the part where a brilliant flame caused by the combustion of the alcohol was interpreted as signifying the presence of the deity. In the *Risalah* this may be comparable to the wind which opportunely blows the remains of the cremation away right at the end of the ceremony,

The wood caught fire, [Yaqt: and then the ship, the tent], the man, the jariyyah and all it contained. A dreadful wind [Yaqt: arose and the flames of the fire grew in intensity and] its blaze was fierce. [Yaqt: One of the Rusiyyah stood beside me and I heard him] speaking to the interpreter [tarjuman] who was with me...

... I quizzed him about that and he said, "Because of the love which my lord feels for him, he has sent the wind [Yaqt: to take] him away within an hour". In actual fact, it took scarcely an hour for the ship, the firewood, the jariyyah and her master to be burnt to an ash, then to a fine ash.⁴⁶

A further point in case may be the similarities with the *pharmakoi* ritual which we mentioned above, not only regarding the decoration of the sacrificial victim, but also the function of the ritual as interpreted by Dennis Hughes:

The essential element of the ritual was the expulsion from the community of one or two persons called [...] 'pharmakoi', with the expressed purpose of purifying the city. In the different cities the pharmakoi were variously dressed and decorated, paraded about the city, whipped with fig branches and squills, cursed and pelted with stones. In the end they were driven across the city's borders; according to some sources, they were killed.⁴⁷

This sequence contains elements that may be interchanged with elements in the Rus ritual and the purification of the city would then be transposed as a purification of Rus society. That said, the potential connection of Ibn Fadlan's account with the ancient Greek traditions and Burkert's model is probably too weak to assume that it had a significant bearing on it, at least with regard to the subject matter. The similarities may owe their existence to general structures of ritual instead of a genetic relation to a Greek tradition. Whether or not it played a role in defining Ibn Fadlan's narrative structure needs further examination.

⁴⁶ *Risalah*, p. 164, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (Forthcoming).

⁴⁷ D. D. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 139.

As we discussed in chapter one, Ibn Fadlan's report on the Rus has enjoyed substantial attention from scholars and has in particular been employed a great deal to further the argument that the Rus were Scandinavian. In this regard, no single part of the description has received more scrutiny than the funerary ritual, and our focus henceforth shall remain there. Not only is the prominence of the ritual given here, above other aspects of Rus customs and appearance, due to its greater volume and details but much rather its possibility to reveal to us something about the inner workings of Rus society. No other works at our disposal contain such well-informed ethnographies of them. Ibn Fadlan's description is the only extant text that may be examined with the aim of constructing a theory of what their society was like, based on his observations of their ritual, even though Ibn Fadlan himself would not have understood fully the meaning and the social background of the proceedings he witnessed.

The cultural significance of ritual and its potential to reflect the dynamics of the society or group to which they belong has long been recognised in the social sciences.⁴⁸ Rites of passage⁴⁹ such as the Rus funeral can be seen, in Catherine Bell's words, to "culturally mark a person's transition from one stage of social life to another" and that they "frequently depict a sociocultural order that overlays the natural biological order without being identical to it." In any case, Bell continues, "the tension between the natural and the cultural that is sometimes recognized and sometimes disguised in life-cycle rituals appears to be integral to the values and ideas that shape personal identity, social organization, and cultural tradition."⁵⁰

The aim in the following is to suggest an interpretation of certain elements in Ibn Fadlan's description that have hitherto gone unnoticed or been interpreted within a somewhat rigid conceptual framework and with too limited regard to the broader cultural background. In chapter one we have already discussed this context and in chapter two we put forth a number of passages indicating the

⁴⁸ At least since Émile Durkheim's *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1912).

⁴⁹ As defined by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*, transl. by M.B. Vizedom and G.L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 65.

⁵⁰ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009), p. 94.

wider cultural milieu in which the Rus found themselves in the mid- and lower Volga region and Khazaria during the ninth and tenth centuries. In the following we shall examine the description of the Rus funerary ritual with a view to its potential to reflect or perhaps cast further light on these cultural contacts, as well as to what extent it may be employed as a window on certain aspects of Rus identity and social dynamics.

3.3 The Ritual and Cultural Context

Since modern scholarship became acquainted with Ibn Fadlan's work several interpretations of the funerary ritual passage have been offered, most of which largely converge in that they have viewed the ritual as basically Scandinavian, or more specifically pertaining to the cult of Odin. This development has inevitably caused considerable interest among scholars dealing with medieval Scandinavian history and religion, and especially Old Norse mythology.

At the outset, there is little denial that the ceremony bears some resemblance to known medieval Scandinavian burial rites. Although no description to Ibn Fadlan's account exists in the Old Norse material, some correspondence is found in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga Saga* composed in the thirteenth century:

In his country Odin introduced such laws as had been in force among the Æsir before. Thus he ordered that all the dead were to be burned on a pyra together with their possessions, saying that everyone would arrive in Valhalla with such wealth as he had with him on his pyra and that he would also enjoy the use of what he himself had hidden in the ground. For notable men burial mounds were to be thrown up as memorials. But for all men who had shown great manly qualities memorial stones were to be erected, and this custom continued for a long time thereafter.⁵¹

The notion of human sacrifice, albeit in a different context and setting, appears in *Kjalnesinga Saga* in the account of a temple erected by one Þorgrímur in honour of Thor. One item featuring among the sacrificial facilities was a large copper bowl:

⁵¹ *Ynglinga Saga*, chapter 9, in *Heimskringla*, trans. L. M. Hollander, pp. 11–12.

All blood resulting from animals or men sacrificed to Thor should be put therein. This was called 'hlautr' (sacrificial blood) and 'hlautbolli' (bowl or cup containing the hlautr). The *hlautr* was to be poured over men or animals but what animals were sacrificed should be feasted on at the *blót*, but the men who were sacrificed were to be dumped into a ditch out by the door [Transl. T. J. H.].⁵²

Human sacrifice on *blót* feasts among the *Suenoes* is also mentioned by Adam of Bremen⁵³ and regarding the archaeological evidence we have for example the Oseberg ship unearthed in southern Norway, where the remains of two women were discovered to have been buried along with the boat and burial offerings.⁵⁴ Another element supporting a Scandinavian interpretation of the ritual is the moment when the slave-girl removes here arm rings and anklets which may have some correspondence with the story of Baldur's funeral, where Odin places a golden ring named Draupnir on the pyre.⁵⁵

Even though the evidence is disparate, and exact correspondences with Ibn Fadlan's description are certainly limited, the ritual described in the *Risalah* seems to be at least partly culturally Scandinavian or based on Scandinavian ritual practices.⁵⁶ It seems, however, that interpretations aimed at equating the ritual with Scandinavian practices, based on the evidence of archaeology and mythology, have in some cases been pushed to the limit and even beyond it.

In a recent article, the Danish historian of religion Jens Peter Schjødt attempted to demonstrate how the Rus funerary ceremony is rooted in the semantic world conveyed to us by Old Norse mythic literature and that Ibn Fadlan's account could be used to reconstruct some of the ancient Scandinavian pagan customs. It is impossible here to discuss all the elements of the funeral dealt with by Schjødt, but as a case in point of his method we will focus in particular on the role of the

⁵² "Þar skyldi í láta blóð það allt er af því fé yrði er Þór var gefið eða mönnum. Þetta kölluðu þeir hlaut og hlautbolla. Hlautinu skyldi dreifa yfir menn eða fé en fé það sem þar var gefið til skyldi hafa til mannfagnaðar þá er blótveislur eru hafðar. En mönnum er þeir blótuðu skyldi steypa ofan í fen það er úti var hjá dyrunum" (*Kjalnesinga saga*, p. 1438).

⁵³ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Bremen*, transl. by F. J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 207–8.

⁵⁴ N. Price, 'Dying and the Dead', in *The Viking World*, pp. 257–73 (p. 266).

⁵⁵ *Snorra-Edda*, ed. by G. Jónsson (Akureyri: Oddur Björnsson, 1954), p. 82.

⁵⁶ It is important to note that what is termed here 'culturally Scandinavian' by no means assumes homogenous practices throughout the traditionally defined Scandinavian geographical territory. The notion of regional variations has been particularly stressed in recent times, for instance F. Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, 2 vols (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2003), II, pp. 104 and 202; L. Abrams' discussion in 'Diaspora and Identity in the Viking Age', pp. 21–23.

sacrificed slave-girl and, more generally, his and other scholars' rather narrow cultural (and geographical) perspectives on the ritual.

Schjødt sees the ceremony basically as rite of passage, an initiation of the girl in order to enter Valhalla with her master.⁵⁷ He duly acknowledges the difficulties with comparing material gathered by a tenth century Arab and thirteenth century Christian authors and goes on to say that we cannot be sure whether at all the ritual described were Scandinavian practices. Schjødt explains that “it is possible that they [the Rus] had lived in the Volga region for two or more generations, and that they had acquired local Slavonic traditions” and also that “Ibn Fadlan did not speak the language of the Rus, since he needed an interpreter, of whom we do not know whether he was an Arab, Scandinavian, or perhaps Slavonic.”⁵⁸ Schjødt appears to be unaware that all evidence we possess suggests that the lands of Volga Bulgars and the regions of the mid- and lower Volga at the time were predominantly inhabited by Turkic peoples.⁵⁹ He proceeds to saying that in case there are significant similarities between Ibn Fadlan's description and the ideology in the Old Norse written sources, “it is likely that many of the other details, mentioned by the Arab but not the Norse sources, also took place during Scandinavian burial rituals” and that if “apparently obscure details can be explained meaningfully with reference to models built on comparative material, it seems precipitant to reject such explanations just because the Old Norse material is not explicit in these matters.”⁶⁰ That may well be so, but why does the model part exclusively from our knowledge of traditions preserved in the Old Norse sources, in particular when the ceremony took place far removed from that context?

The resistance to taking the potential influence of local peoples into account, or perhaps the idea that the Rus were impervious to it, is also apparent in the deduction of the Scandinavian scholars Tina Sass and Morten Lund Warmind that the Rus would not have used the term ‘angel of death’ since it is nowhere to

⁵⁷ J. P. Schjødt, ‘Ibn Fadlan's Account of a Rus Funeral: To What Degree does it Reflect Nordic Myths?’, in *Reflections on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. by Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt and Rasmus Trandum Kristensen (Place: Press, 2007), pp. 133–46.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵⁹ On the language of the Volga Bulgars see chapter one, p. 15, note 41.

⁶⁰ J. P. Schjødt, ‘Ibn Fadlan's Account of a Rus Funeral’, p. 136.

be found in Old Norse literature. Being a reference to the Qur'an, they earmark it as Ibn Fadlan's invention, when it could equally have been his or the interpreter's translation. After all Ibn Fadlan does on more than one occasion reiterate that the Angel of Death was known by this name among the Rus.⁶¹

Of the many curious features of the ceremony, the role and ordeal of the slave-girl are perhaps most intriguing, and here the interpretations of Warmind and the Polish archaeologist Wladyslaw Duczko run along similar lines to that of Schjødt. In another article Warmind emphasizes the elevation of the slave-girl's social status by stating that: "The actual death, the strangling and the stabbing have long been recognized as the Odinic way of sacrificing kings. The happy girl [sic] is sent to Odin to be with her master".⁶² And Duczko: "The slave-girl who voluntarily agreed to follow her dead master was by this decision turned into his bride and while waiting for the end was acting as such. Turning the slave-girl into the bride of the chieftain moved her from the low social position of a [...] servant of the dead Rus to his official wife".⁶³ In a comparable manner, Eric Christiansen deduces that since cremation was an entitlement of the free, the slave girl saw her own sacrifice on the pyre as a privilege.⁶⁴ The Czech archaeologist Zdeňek Vaňa even attempted to recreate a visual interpretation of the scene where the 'angel of death' is depicted as lurking quite inactively in the background, and the whole atmosphere is one of serenity; a romantic image of a post-mortem sacred marriage, without a trace of the violence so minutely described by Ibn Fadlan.⁶⁵

⁶¹ T. Sass and M. L. Warmind, 'Mission Saqaliba', *Chaos*, vol. 11 (1989), 31–49 (p. 41). Cf. *Risalah*, p. 159: "...the daughters of the woman known as the 'Angel of Death'."

⁶² M. L. Warmind, 'Ibn Fadlan in the Context of his Age', in *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by O. Crumlin–Pedersen and B. Munch (Copenhagen: PNM, 1995), pp. 131–35 (p. 134).

⁶³ W. Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 145.

⁶⁴ E. Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 296–97.

⁶⁵ Z. Vaňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs* (London: Orbis, 1983), p. 85.

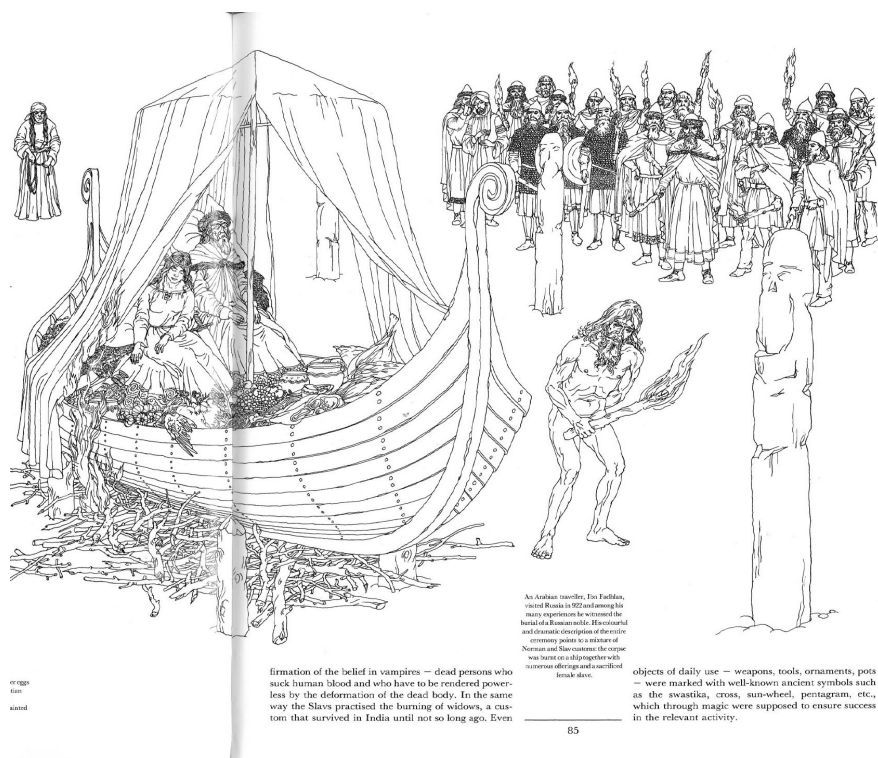


Figure 6. Zdeňek Vaňa's artistic rendition of Ibn Fadlan's account of a Rus nobleman's funeral (from Z. Vaňa, *The World of the Ancient Slavs* (London: Orbis, 1983), p. 85).

Apart from the matter of interpreting the ceremony exclusively from the viewpoint of Scandinavian mythology, there is certainly an alarming discordance between these interpretations and the actual description of the slave-girl's death as it appears in Ibn Fadlan's text. How the scholars mentioned above have been able to construe the depiction of multiple rapes and brutal strangulation as an illustration of a happy or peaceful occasion is intriguing.⁶⁶ Leaving aside the veracity of Ibn Fadlan's text or the precise meaning of this ritual it remains that there is an obvious and to some extent mysterious discrepancy, between the words in the text and their analyses. It might be argued that this discrepancy is perhaps symbolic, or symptomatic, of a certain leap of faith necessary for their interpretations.

⁶⁶ See T. Taylor's refreshingly different interpretation which draws our attention to the violence and the function of the ritual in containing the soul of the deceased within the liminal sphere, that it does not escape (T. Taylor, *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death* (London: Beacon Press, 2002), pp. 86–111 and 170–92).

Regarding the cultural ‘origin’ or affiliation of the ritual it may on closer examination raise several problems to view the ceremony in Ibn Fadlan’s account as Scandinavian or Odinic. One is, as we have mentioned, that we do not possess any such or similar accounts in the Old Norse literature. Secondly, while there are traditions which can most decidedly be connected with Scandinavia on account of the archaeological evidence such as the boat incineration, there are other elements which cannot be explained as being uniquely Scandinavian. We can indeed find parallels in other cultures from various periods: the strangling of the *jariyah* during her master’s funeral has for instance correspondences with Herodotus’ descriptions of the burial rituals of Scythian kings.⁶⁷ The treatment of the sacrificial victim as a noble person is parallel to sequences in the so-called *pharmakoi* ritual in several ancient Greek colonies as well as in Aztec sacrificial customs as we shall come to later on.⁶⁸ Moreover, the description of the place in the afterlife to which the slave-girl is heading ‘as beautiful and verdant’ and a place where she would join her whole family seems at odds with any description we possess of Valhalla, regardless of the not unimportant question whether women⁶⁹ were allowed to enter there at all. We may also note the presence of the basil herb, which according to Timothy Taylor would have been used for embalming.⁷⁰ The basil was brought from India to Europe only in the sixteenth century,⁷¹ and would thus not have been included in funerary ceremonies in Scandinavia. Even with just a few examples like these it has to follow that numerous elements in Ibn Fadlan’s Rus ceremony cannot be deemed exclusively culturally Scandinavian, nor can they be seen as specific only to the cult of Odin.

An important question then, from our perspective, is whether they are related to any similar rituals that transpired in the area in which the Rus subsisted at the time: that is, can we identify any elements that traditionally are attributed to Turkic peoples?

⁶⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 4.71–72, transl. by R. Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 258–59.

⁶⁸ D. D. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*, p. 139 seq.

⁶⁹ Or slaves in general. See above the procedure for selecting the sacrificial victim for the Rus ceremony. The point, noted above, that both slave-girls or concubines and slave-boys could ‘volunteer’ to be sacrificed also raises doubts regarding the nuptial aspect of the ritual.

⁷⁰ T. Taylor, *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, pp. 177–78.

⁷¹ T. Stobart, *Herbs, Spices, and Flavorings* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1982), pp. 51–55.

Unfortunately the source material is limited, and the general scarcity of texts documenting culture and customs among the Turkic peoples in medieval times provides too little as to furnish us with definite answers or clear parallels. Also, as with our caveat regarding Scandinavian customs above, we should also avoid the pitfall of assuming any purity or homogeneity regarding the traditions of the Turkic peoples who had been influenced by many traditions, in particular Iranian (due to symbiosis for centuries) and more recently at this stage, the Islamic world. ‘Turkic’ is employed here as a broad term describing characteristics generally vinctuated with the traditions attributed to them. Their condition as emporia for peoples and goods of widely diverse provenance suggests that the cities of the Khazars and also the Bulgars on the Volga were multi-ethnic societies: veritable melting pots of cultures were mainly trade served as instigator of all kinds of crosspollination. Accordingly, explaining specific customs that our sources connect with these peoples from the point of view of a particular religion, such as Tengrism,⁷² may lead us to similarly rigid perspectives as held by those scholars who see the Rus funeral exclusively from the point of view of Old Norse mythology. In any case, there are elements in Ibn Fadlan’s description which require consideration as to whether they may be attributed to Turkic influence.

The strangling of the girl may have resonance in the Khazar initiation ritual of near-strangling a future *khaqan*, a tradition that is corroborated by two completely different and unrelated traditions, a Chinese chronicle on the Turkic tribe of Ashina and the Arabic on the Khazars.⁷³ Corresponding to the moment when the slave girl gazes beyond the door-frame structure and sees her relatives, which

⁷² The animistic religion of many of the Altaic peoples. See ‘Tengri’, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, pp. 401–3.

⁷³ Peter B Golden, ‘Khazar Studies: Achievements and Perspectives’, in *The World of the Khazars: New Perspectives: Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Conference* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 55. We may also note in passing that the Volga Bulgars had a custom of hanging peoples by the neck: “If they see that a man is quick and knowledgeable about things, they say, ‘It is this man’s due that he be in the service of our lord’, and then take hold of him, place a rope around his neck and hang him from a tree until the rope is frayed and snaps.” (*Risalah*, p. ..., *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming). It is tempting to connect this concomitance of hanging from a tree and wisdom with the stanza in *Hávamál* where Odin acquires knowledge hanging from *Yggdrasill* with a rope around his neck (*Hávamál*, ed. by G. Jónsson (Akureyri: Oddur Björnsson, 1954), pp. 59–60). This motif may have been carried from the Volga Bulgars to Scandinavia, just like the motif of the story of *Órnar-Oddur* was apparently transmitted to Scandinavia from Byzantium (see A. Stender-Petersen, ‘The Byzantine Prototype to the Varangian Story of the Hero’s Death through his Horse’, in *Varangica* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno, 1953), pp. 181–88. See also chapter five below.

Taylor compares with the gate *grindr* that separates the living from the dead in the *Elder Edda*,⁷⁴ it is known that the idea of a family reunion in the afterlife is a prominent part of Turkic funerary rituals, as well as being a rather universal notion.⁷⁵ This particular sequence in the ceremony also has more specific details which may correspond to Jean-Paul Roux's analysis of Turkic and Altaic ritual. Roux identified two fundamental elements of the funerary ritual, the integration into the cosmos which is in perpetual movement, and the search for the axis of the world. Roux continues to say that in the funeral ceremonies, the body of the deceased can not be the focal point, and that it is not around it which everything turns, but around the axis, which is not mentioned. This axis can only be made of fire, a tree, a pole or a stele; a column extending from the earth towards the sky, with which the deceased can access the beyond.⁷⁶ The 'door-frame' structure described by Ibn Fadlan could have been a structure erected for this purpose, a symbol of verticality and elevation skywards.

Another parallel with burial customs among Altaic peoples, with which the Turkic peoples are grouped, albeit somewhat distant in time, is obtainable from the travelogue of the Swedish general Johann Schnitscher, who during military service with the Chinese army in the early eighteenth century described a funeral among the Kalmyks, one of the Altaic steppe peoples, who by the time Schnitscher visited them lived a stone's throw south of old Bulghar, near Saratov on the Samarra bend. Schnitscher reports that the Kalmyks pitched a tent for the deceased, under which he lay for ten days while preparations took place, similarly to the case of the Rus chieftain.⁷⁷ The chronological gap is large, but the resemblance of this particular element speaks for itself. Another common funerary custom of the steppe peoples also present in Ibn Fadlan's description, is

⁷⁴ T. Taylor, *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, p. 186.

⁷⁵ R. Bezertinov, *Tengrianizm: Religion of Turks and Mongols* (2000).

⁷⁶ J.-P. Roux, *Faune et flore sacrées dans les sociétés altaïques* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1966), pp. 61–62 ("Mais, dans les cérémonies funebres, le cadavre ne peut être le point central; ce n'est donc pas en fait autour de lui qu'on tourne mais autour d'un axe qu'on ne mentionne pas. Cet axe ne peut être forme que par le feu, l'arbre, le mat ou la stele, en un mot par la colonne qui part de la terre, monte vers le ciel, et que le défunt va avoir à escalader pour gagner l'au-delà").

⁷⁷ Johann Christian Schnitscher, *Berättelse om ajuckiniska Calmuckiet : eller om detta folkets ursprung, burn de kommit under ryssarnas lydno, deras gudar, gudsdyrkan och prester* (Stockholm, 1744). See also John R. Krueger's edition and translation: *An Account of the Kalmyk Land under Ayuki Khan*, trans. and ed. by J. R. Krueger (Bloomington: Mongolia Society, 1996). The practice of keeping the deceased body under a tent while other preparations are made, is in fact common among the Turkic and Altaic peoples (J.-P. Roux, *La mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1963), p. 148).

having horses run until they are at the point of exhaustion, with or without their subsequent sacrificial slaughter.⁷⁸

Expanding our horizon even more, we come across elements in burial rituals among Siberian peoples that have parallels to Ibn Fadlan's description. A procedure involving lifting up the deceased several times asking questions on the cause of death existed among the Selkups between the Ob and the Yenisei rivers and death by strangulation appears as a sacrificial method of animals in N'ganasan rituals of N-Siberia, although the context is certainly not the same.⁷⁹

We may also in this context make mention of Ibn Fadlan's description of the tattoos worn by the Rus: "Each man, from the tip of his toes to his neck, is covered in dark <lines> trees, pictures and such like."⁸⁰ There is apparently little evidence of such bodily decoration in the Old Norse material. However, this custom and similar patterns have been observed in the excavation of kurgan no. 2 at Pazyryk in the Altai region from the fifth century, which, although distant from the Volga, was a part of the nomadic world connecting the vast expanses of Inner Eurasia.⁸¹

Similarities between the Rus and Turkic peoples may also be found within the account itself. A part of Ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus resonates with his account the Turkic Ghuzz, who at that time lived probably north and west of the Caspian Sea where the trade route to the Samanids lay, and whom the author met on his way north to Bulghar on the Volga. The description of funerary rituals among the Turkic Ghuzz includes several elements which may be compared with the Rus funeral, such as the passing on to a place termed 'the Garden' or paradise (Arab. *al-Jannah*), and the notion of some kind of a reunion where the deceased would be attended to by servants. Furthermore, the Ghuzz also exhume their

⁷⁸ J.-P. Roux, *Faune et flore sacrées dans les sociétés altaïques*, pp. 60–61. This sequence is also witnessed by the famous thirteenth century traveller Ibn Battuta in the funeral of a Mongol prince (C. Defremery and B. R. Sanguinetti, *Voyages d'Ibn Battuta*, 5 vols. (Paris: Société Asiatique, 1853–1858), vol. 4, p. 301).

⁷⁹ *Practical Dictionary of Siberia and the North* (Moscow: European Publications and Severnye Prostory, 2005), p. 131.

⁸⁰ *Risalah*, p. 146.

⁸¹ J. Bourgeois, W. Gheyle et al., 'The Frozen Tombs of the Altai Mountains, Phase 1 2005–2006', *UGent Archeologische Rapporten*, no. 4 (2007), 1–84 (p. 5); N. V. Polosmak, 'Tattoos in the Pazyryk World', *Archaeology, Ethnology and Anthropology of Eurasia*, no. 4 (2004), 95–102.

deceased ones from a preliminary grave and clothe him in his warrior outfit, and place all his wealth in the final dwelling place, which seem to be some kind of a chamber grave, on top of which a clay tent is built.⁸²

Interestingly, this is not the only context in which we encounter similarities between the descriptions of these two peoples in Ibn Fadlan's account. Let us compare for example the following descriptions on the Ghuzz and the Rus respectively:

When one of them falls ill, and he has jariyahs and slaves, they wait on him and the people of his household do not approach him. They pitch a tent for him, to one side of the other tents, where he remains until he either dies or recovers. If he is a slave or a poor man, they simply throw him out into the open plain and leave him there.

When one of them falls ill, [Yaqt: they pitch a tent for him] away from them and cast him into it, giving him some bread and water. They do not come near him or speak to him, [Yaqt: indeed they have no contact with him for the duration of his illness], especially if he is socially inferior or is a slave. If he recovers and gets back to his feet, he rejoins them. If he dies, they burn him, though if he was a slave they leave him there as food for the dogs and the birds of prey.⁸³

Such abandonment of a dying person (exposition) is in fact one established way of disposing of the deceased, and may possibly relate to the idea that death was eminently contagious, current among various Turkic peoples.⁸⁴ Another instance where Ibn Fadlan employs the same expression for the Rus and the Ghuzz is in his distaste for their customs of hygiene and religious inclinations respectively: "They are like the asses which err" (*ka'l-hamir ad-dallah*).⁸⁵

Whether Ibn Fadlan was merely copying his own text here or whether the customs of these peoples or their impression on him in fact were similar is impossible to say. At any rate it raises the question of why he would allot very similar descriptions to these two groups and whether he perceived of them as being in some way comparable.

⁸² *Risalah*, p. 99.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 99 (Ghuzz) and pp. 154–55 (Rus), *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

⁸⁴ See M. Eliade, 'Turkic Religions', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1993), p. 88. J.-P. Roux, *La mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médievales*, p. 140.

⁸⁵ *Risalah*, p. 91 (Ghuzz) and p. 151 (Rus), *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

As to the evidence provided by other Arabic writers on the Rus funerary customs it is fortunate that two of the more important writers included precisely this aspect of Rus culture in their descriptions. Ibn Rustah, writing probably in the first decade of the tenth century, mentions funerary customs of the Rus bearing some resemblance to those of Ibn Fadlan, although some elements differ:

When someone important dies, a grave like a large house is constructed where he is placed in his vestments and with the golden bracelet, which he usually bears, along with some food, wine and coins. A woman he particularly favoured is buried alive with him, the grave is then shut and she dies there.⁸⁶

Ibn Rustah further remarks that the Rus have *atibba'* (sg. *tabib*, 'medicine man', possibly 'shaman' or the like) who yields control over their possessions and who selects men and women for sacrifice.⁸⁷ In the account of the Saqalibah funerary ritual, which immediately precedes the passage on the Rus, Ibn Rustah attributes elements to them that are similar to elements in the Rus ceremony such as the sacrifice with strangulation of a woman who admitted her love for him although in other respects it is quite different. As we mentioned in chapter two, a considerable part of Ibn Rustah's work is in all likelihood armchair geography and it is possible that he may have merged or split up some of the information he obtained on the various barbarous customs.

Al-Mas'udi's description from the mid-tenth century also brings up elements similar to the accounts of Ibn Rustah and Ibn Fadlan, without being textually reliant on them it seems. It is significant here that these Rus are reported to reside in the main city of the Khazars, Atil, which the writer apparently visited in person. Al-Mas'udi shows interest in the logic behind their outlandish funerary ritual, while also seizing the opportunity to demonstrate his vast knowledge of cultures:

They cremate their deceased ones, their beasts of burden and their belongings, instruments and jewellery. When a man dies his wife is incinerated while still alive, and if the woman dies the man is not burnt. If unmarried men among them die they marry him after his death. The women desire the cremation themselves to gain entry for

⁸⁶ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, p. 146–47 [transl. T. J. H.].

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 129.

themselves into paradise. This custom is similar to a custom in India, as we have previously related.⁸⁸

Al-Mas'udi passages on the Rus (see chapter two, section 2.4.2) furnish plenty of contexts in which the Rus may have adopted or been influenced by customs and traditions in the Khazar kaghanate. Al-Mas'udi writes that in fact both Rus and Muslims constitute each a special section of the army or bodyguard under the command of the Khazar kaghan.⁸⁹ It has been suggested by James Montgomery that the Rus encountered by Ibn Fadlan may indeed have been part of or somehow connected with this institution.⁹⁰

As testimony to the involvement of the Rus in the state of affairs in the Khazar city of Atil, Al-Mas'udi writes that

Officially the Khazar Royal House appoints seven judges: two of them for the Muslims, two of the for the Khazars, who deliver judgment according to the Torah, two for the Christians who deliver judgment according to the Evangelium, and one for the Saqalibah, Rus and all the pagans, who deliver judgment according to pagan law which is by ratiocinative litigation. When there emerges a grave matter of which they have no knowledge they go jointly to the Muslim judges and present their case to them and follow what the law of Islam requires.⁹¹

Not only does this passage convey an image of the Rus as embedded in Khazarian society, although as has been stated before and as evidenced from Al-Mas'udi's description, at least parts of it incorporated peoples of several different cultural backgrounds. What it also conveys is the Rus' engagement in Khazarian society, which in this case also entailed acquaintance with Islamic custom and law.⁹²

Returning, then, to the original question of whether the funerary ritual described by Ibn Fadlan can be seen as related to similar rituals that transpired in the area in which the Rus subsisted at the time, or whether we can identify any elements that traditionally are attributed to Turkic peoples, it can be said that some of the evidence we possess may favour such a connection. At the very least it would be

⁸⁸ Al-Mas'udi, *Murij al-dhabab* II, pp. 7–12 [transl. T. J. H.].

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁹⁰ J. E. Montgomery, 'Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources', p. 165.

⁹¹ Al-Mas'udi, *Murij al-dhabab* II, pp. 11–12 [transl. T. J. H.].

⁹² As we discussed in chapter one, the lands of the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars are a possible source of Islamic elements in Scandinavia or among Scandinavian peoples.

spurious to claim that what we may term here as 'local' elements are more dissipated or problematic to extract than are the purported Scandinavian aspects of the ceremony. No description similar to Ibn Fadlan's account is known to us and in our search for comparative material we are merely left with isolated elements from ritual sequences from various different cultural collectives. This situation prompts us to view the ritual through a different prism, which is the idea that it was culturally not *either* Scandinavian or Turkic or, more generally, not attributable to the traditions any *one* culture but two, or perhaps even more. It is interesting to note that such adaptations, in contrast with many of the approaches surveyed above, seem quite natural for the archaeologist Ingmar Jansson. Discussing the problems associated with identifying types of burial, Jansson has noted that

many differences may be due to natural circumstances. The use of stones and stone constructions in the graves is generally singled out as a Scandinavian feature and the use of wooden constructions as a Finno-Ugrian and Slavic feature. The widespread use of stones in Scandinavia may, however, be due to the fact that stones are so abundant and ready at hand here. The frequency of stones in the graves in Scandinavia varies with the natural frequency of stones, and it would only be natural if Scandinavians settled in Russia started using more wooden constructions in their graves as well as changing other details of their rites according to Eastern European practices.⁹³

It is not unlikely that the funerary ritual described by Ibn Fadlan was influenced by the cultural milieu in which the Rus subsisted for prolonged periods of the ninth and tenth centuries. Hence, it may be more appropriate to view the ceremony as specific to the particular time and place in which it transpired instead of appropriating it for one determined, uniform culture.

⁹³ I. Jansson, 'Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age', p. 776.

3.4 The Ritual and Rus Identity

Although the aim in this chapter is not to go to great lengths about the inner logic and meaning of the ritual or its constituent elements, it may be fruitful to examine a little further what it might be able to reveal to us regarding the Rus' social structure and identity.

In chapter one, we mentioned the approach of Peter Golden who suggested that it may be viable to view the Rus in the Arabic sources as being in the stage of their development as they began to penetrate Eastern Europe still being a somewhat socially fluid group, incorporating other ethnic elements on the way, and identifiable above all as a commercial and political organisation, and that of James Montgomery who emphasises the social fluidity of the Rus as well as the lack of cultural uniformity of their surroundings and the possibility of both Khazar and Volga Bulghar influence. We have in this chapter addressed the cultural 'orientation' of the ritual, and in chapter two the cultural milieu in which the Rus found themselves at this point in time. It remains now to address whether the ritual can be seen to have had any specific function for the Rus social structure and identity. We shall here make mention of two aspects, the first has a bearing on what we have previously intimated on Rus identity and social makeup, and the second on Ibn Fadlan's composition of the account.

If we are to view the ritual itself as somehow reflecting the nature of the social situation of the Rus, two observations can be made. The first is directed at the violence and brutality of the sequence which may in simple terms be seen as reverberating their turbulent subsistence and environment, strife and slave trade, and long and arduous ventures beset with danger. From this period we have indeed a brutal depiction of looting and mass-murder on behalf of the Rus on the coast of the Caspian Sea, one that was remembered for some time.⁹⁴ Other parts of Ibn Fadlan's description sustain this as well: "Every one of them carries an axe, a sword and a dagger and all of that which we have mentioned never parts from

⁹⁴ Both Al-Mas'udi around the mid-tenth century and later Miskawayh in a somewhat different version vividly describe the brutality of the Rus plunderers slaughtering women, children and the elderly (see chapter two, section 2.4.2).

him”, and that “each man, from the tip of his toes to his neck, is covered in dark lines, trees, pictures and such like.”⁹⁵ This is a description of a man in a state of constant alert, and the tattoos, or some kind of a body paint, would only have the effect of making his appearance more commanding and fear-inspiring. This portrayal also has resonance with Ibn Rustah’s report: “When a child is born, the father presents it with a sword saying: ‘I shall not leave you any fortune in inheritance, and you will gain nothing apart from what you will obtain with this sword.’”⁹⁶

The second observation, related to the first, is that this treatment of the slaves at special occasions may have been a part not only of preparing an extraordinary sacrificial victim upon the death of a nobleman, but that it may also give us insight into a different, more complex social phenomenon. Not long ago the archaeologist Timothy Taylor⁹⁷ pointed out certain similarities between the Rus ritual and the interpretation of rituals of human sacrifice among the Aztecs by historian Inga Clendinnen where she identifies a part of the preparations of the sacrificed as ‘victim management’. This procedure involved a certain vanity in being selected for the ritual, pampering and flattery as well as being assigned two ‘face washers’, an element indeed very similar to that of the Rus ceremony where the daughters of the angel of death attend the slave-girl. For the Aztecs, Clendinnen maintains, such methods were aimed at inducing a certain passivity and even complicity, however virtual, on behalf of the sacrificial victims, often in huge numbers each time, who were expected to queue for their own deaths while hearing and even seeing corpses of advance victims being thrown down the pyramid, with all the blood and gore this entailed.⁹⁸

If something similar was the case in the Rus ritual it may be suggested that not only was this a charade intended to lure other slaves to ‘volunteer’ to be sacrificed in the future, it could also have served to make them think that they had a place in the Rus society, a factor that could in turn have had the effect of making them more docile. In this sense, the message of the ruling elite to their slaves, in this

⁹⁵ *Risalab*, p. 150.

⁹⁶ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-'laq an-nafisah*, p. 145.

⁹⁷ T. Taylor, *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, p. 99 seq.

⁹⁸ I. Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 103–4.

case possibly a more permanent group of servants or escorts,⁹⁹ was that there was a short cut to attaining high social status. In reality, this was probably far from being the case as evidenced by Ibn Fadlan's passage on their usual treatment of their slaves (see passage above). At the very least there seems to be a stark contrast between what was the actual status of the slaves and what they were led to believe about their status on special occasions. Timothy Taylor suggested, in line with his interpretation of the Rus as 'purely' Scandinavian, that the girl's ordeal was tricky inspired by Odin, the god of deception. However, we do not require the deceptive attributes of Odin to reach the conclusion that the girl was tricked; this can be inferred from the state of affairs in the Rus society, that is its make-up as a warrior elite that traded with slaves, as well as narrative moments in the account itself.

At the point in the funeral when the ship had quickly been consumed in the fire aided by a sudden wind a Rus comments to Ibn Fadlan that "because of the love which my lord feels for him [i.e. his dead master] he has sent the wind to take him away within an hour". There is no mention of 'her', and as a further confirmation that this was a one-man transportation to the afterlife Ibn Fadlan tells us that "they built something like a round hillock over the ship [...] and placed in the middle of it a large piece of khadank wood [birch] on which they wrote the name of the man and the name of the King of the Rus. Then they left". Again there is no mention of the slave-girl, who appears to remain as status-less in death as she did in life, the implicit function of the ritual being reinforcement and redefinition of status and social roles within Rus society: a symbolic representation of the immense inequality between the powerful leaders and the powerless slaves carried out, in part, with the violence that permeates the ceremony. Taylor remarks that

the multiple rapes and the fire-setting by the whole gathering communalized her killing. Like execution by firing squad, responsibility was taken by everyone and no one. It was an assertion of human power in the face of disempowerment by death in general, and it served to create group solidarity. Groups are defined by what they exclude.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Because it is problematic and contradictory to assume that slaves that were to be sold off after short term captivity were treated in this manner.

¹⁰⁰ T. Taylor, *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, p. 192.

He goes on to elaborate on the meaning of the ritual for Rus identity, and characterises it as typical for a “*Männerbunde* society – a mobile, military and male elite owing a kind of allegiance only to one another”.¹⁰¹ Referring to Al-Mas‘udi’s description of the Rus as a specific military or guardian unit the court of the Khazar kaghan in Atil, this kind of social structure would have been ideally suited for the purpose. We may also detect a notion similar to that of Taylor’s in Walter Burkert’s observations of the social aspects of Greek ritual:

There is *aischrologia* alongside *euphemia*, there is cultic defilement as well as cultic purity, and above all there is the violent act in the sacrificial ritual, the ox-murder, bloodshed and dismemberment, destruction in the fire, and there is madness, whether appearing as a fatal doom or as an epiphany of the mad god. ... With human sacrifice, religion and morality part company. ... In ritual and mythology there is obviously a no to every yes, an antithesis to every thesis: order and dissolution, inside and outside, life and death. The individual development of the moral personality, reflected in a coherent system, is overshadowed by supra-personal constraints. More important than individual morality is continuity, which depends on solidarity.¹⁰²

It is well known from anthropology that brutal communities perform brutal rituals. Their interests are generally vested in other affairs than the welfare of their captured, such as economic gains or increased authority over resources.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined the early tenth century description of the Rus in Volga Bulgharia attributed to Ibn Fadlan, a text that has had a perduring effect on scholar’s interpretation of their identity and ethnicity. We have suggested that it may not only be problematic to ascertain their ‘origins’ or homeland culture, but that it may also be necessary to re-examine the concepts we are applying in our interpretation. By doing so we are better able to reconcile the complex picture our sources, including Ibn Fadlan, provide us. We have chosen here to focus in this respect particularly on the description of the funerary ritual which, in our view, is the most salient indicator of Rus cultural ‘orientation’ and social makeup

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁰² W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 248.

and identity, given that other passages devoted to them in the *Risalah* are fairly standard descriptions that share similarities with other reports on barbarous or non-Muslim peoples found in contemporary Arabic geographical literature.

In reviewing interpretations made by other scholars, specifically those who adamantly view the ritual as Scandinavian, and by searching for parallels in the cultural milieu, predominantly Turkic, in which the Rus subsisted, we reached the conclusion that it is possible to trace elements in Ibn Fadlan's description of the funeral on both sides. At the very least it seems that comparing various Turkic or Altaic elements cannot reasonably be deemed more implausible than doing so with the Scandinavian elements. On the whole, it is perhaps more prudent to assume that the ritual is attributable to the traditions and customs of not one culture, but two or several.

Judith Jesch warns of generalising from Ibn Fadlan's account about practices elsewhere in the Viking world. Everywhere the Scandinavians went, she maintains

they developed new ways of living which owed something both to the culture of the immigrant Vikings and to that of the country in which they found themselves, so that no two areas colonised by Scandinavians were alike. They [The Rus met by Ibn Fadlan] are likely to have been a select band of merchant-warriors who, like other touring professionals, may not have behaved the same way when abroad as they did at home.¹⁰³

This simple phrasing cuts directly to the point. There is myriad of ways to interpret Ibn Fadlan's ritual; searching for parallels elsewhere is perhaps not as significant – and perhaps even futile – as examining what it may convey to us regarding the societal makeup and outlook of at least some groups of the far-faring Scandinavians, and in turn how that may reflect the particular situation in which they found themselves at any given point in time.

The ritual observed by Ibn Fadlan can then be seen, aside from its specific religious or theological nature, as a means of maintaining and necessarily

¹⁰³ J. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991), p. 123.

redefining Rus identity in response to their role. This role would have been different from time to time depending on shifting balances in power and trade and hence the ritual perhaps did not exist in precisely this form for very long. Whether this explains Ibn Rustah's earlier and different version is impossible to say. He may have been referring to a different group of Rus with different customs. It is at any rate misguided to seek thorough consistency on behalf of the Arabic sources on the Rus in general, if only for their distance and relative lack of interest in northern peoples, and the extensive period of time over which they were composed. Apart from the individual circumstances and perspective of each source, the ritual itself was potentially in constant evolution and adaptation to new conditions and influences, perhaps by extension reflecting the state of Rus identity at that point in a broader context. Another factor contributing to the instability of the ritual sequence may be the apparent participation of a sizeable number of Rus individuals as opposed to being rigidly prescribed and carried out only by an initiated person or persons. This would have multiplied the potential for transformation of ritual elements, a phenomenon discussed for instance by the anthropologist Bruce Kapferer, and subsequently increase the pace at which it changed in the course of time.¹⁰⁴ At any rate, and regardless of the cultural 'origin' of any or all identifiable elements in the ritual sequence, the circumstances in which it took place and the Rus' interaction with local cultures inevitably exerted its influence on it, in part by introducing new practices or props,¹⁰⁵ but most certainly by contributing to and promoting its transience.

¹⁰⁴ See B. Kapferer, *The Power of Ritual: Transition, Transformation and Transcendence in Ritual Practice*, ed. by B. Kapferer, *Social Analysis*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 1979), pp. 3–9.

¹⁰⁵ "Then they produced a couch and placed it on the ship, covering it with quilts made of Byzantine silk brocade and cushions made of Byzantine silk brocade" (*Risalah*, p. 158). Earlier Ibn Fadlan informs us of the existence of such fabric at the *yltawar's* court along with Armenian rugs (*ibid*, p. 131).

Chapter 4

Material and Symbolic Markers of Cultural Contacts

4.0 Introduction

So far the source material we have examined suggests that the Rus reported by Arabic writers in the ninth and the tenth century interacted with and were influenced especially by the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars, the two most prominent and powerful entities of the region in this period and, as discussed in chapter three, to some extent perhaps connected with the Ghuzz. We have also seen that trade appears to have been the most significant underlying motivation behind these contacts. In our theoretical discussion (in chapter one) of the mechanics of cultural contacts a particular perspective of the framework of acculturation addressed the acquisition of culture-specific behavioural skills necessary to negotiate a new cultural milieu and, moreover, for intercultural communication, including “verbal and nonverbal components, as well as rules, conventions, and norms and their influences on intercultural effectiveness”.¹ The phrase ‘new cultural milieu’ corresponds here to the social, geographical and material dimension of intercultural trade, and also those situations where Rus are reported to subsist among the Khazars or interact with them in a non-mercantile context. The contention here is that both these circumstances may be seen to require at least some of the skills specified in our model. While the written sources yield very little detailed information on such specific aspects of acculturation among those Rus who interacted with the cultures in the Volga-Caspian region, we now turn our attention to the evidence of archaeology and numismatics in search of such indicators, or markers, of cultural contacts.

¹ J. Berry & D. L. Sam, ‘Acculturation’, p. 475.

4.1 Routes and Mobility

While the Rus in the Arabic sources are primarily reported as traders in the region between the mid-Volga, the Don and the Caspian Sea, it is important to note that this area was by no means an isolated trading zone. To the south this region connected with trading networks in the Caliphate and Byzantine Empire onwards to the Mediterranean and the Silk Road to the east. To the west lay the commercial routes of the Frankish realm and further on connections with the British Isles and the Iberian Peninsula and in a north-westerly direction the links with the Baltic and Scandinavia.² In this vast geography, some trading zones were more regional while others were more inter-regional. In some cases the mobility of trading companies was indeed impressive. The merchants called *Radhaniyyah* by Ibn Khurradadhbih, for instance, are reported to have travelled “from the occident to the orient, and from the orient to the occident, sometimes on land, sometimes on sea”.³ A high degree of mobility can also be deduced from descriptions of the Rus in the written sources. We find both passages that comment on their movement over vast territories and they are documented in several distant places from Ingelheim on the Rhine, Constantinople, Bulghar on the Volga to Baghdad, which are separated by many thousands of kilometres. Alongside such evidence, a great mobility of objects, if not the people carrying them, is suggested by archaeological finds such as the so-called Permian rings which can be traced along a route stretching from Perm near the Ural mountains to Jutland and Ireland.⁴ Further indications of long-distance trade or other kind of activity may be seen in artefacts unearthed in Birka and Helgö in the lake Mälaren on the eastern coast of Sweden, such as Chinese silk, a small figurine of Buddha and an Egyptian ladle.⁵

² See, for instance, N. J. G. Pounds, *An Economic History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Longman, 1974), pp. 344–46.

³ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*, p. 153.

⁴ B. Hårdh, ‘Oriental-Scandinavian Contacts on the Volga, as Manifested by Silver Rings and Weight Systems’, in *Silver Economy in the Viking Age*, ed. by James Graham-Campbell and Gareth Williams (London: Left Coast Press, 2007), pp. 135–48.

⁵ R. Hodges & D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe: Archaeology and the Pirenne Thesis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 116–19.

Yet it is unlikely, for the simple reasons of logistics and the problematics of traversing diverse and sometimes hostile territories, that any high volume trade over such enormous distances would be conducted by a single group for a significant amount of time. Regarding the *Radhaniyyah*, for instance, Michael McCormick has suggested that this would be possible for the earliest stages of their enterprise when trade was of low volume. He argues that such operations would have been rather primitive and risky, but with fewer middlemen this practice would have yielded higher profits.⁶ Some scholars have suggested a general pattern of development for long distance trade evolving gradually from a far-stretching initial phase to a more segmented system of routes. Such a transition has been charted, for instance, in the case of the Indian Ocean trade where the long haul was broken down into large, interlocking trading zones around the year 1000.⁷

Recently, Jonathan Shepard has suggested a similar pattern for the development of Rus trade routes, both eastwards and southwards down the Dniepr where there are signs of progressive segmentation in the course of time, “with emporia developing along the way, and local supply-chains branching out in many directions”.⁸ This seems also to fit the Arabic descriptions of the Rus on the whole. Ibn Khurradadhbih, who gives us the earliest reference to them in an Arabic work in the mid-eight century, is the only writer who reports them coming from the northern lands all the way to Baghdad. This contrasts with later accounts which do not attribute such a high level of mobility to the Rus, where instead they are reported in more delimited areas.

In his interpretation of the numismatic evidence, Thomas Noonan concluded that during the late eighth and the ninth century, Islamic coins (see below) were mainly imported into Eastern Europe via the Caspian and the Caucasus, that is the early long route. According to his study of the geography and frequency of hoard deposits, the first half of the ninth century was a period of exploration and

⁶ M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 690.

⁷ K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 36–39 and 48–49.

⁸ J. Shepard, ‘Concluding Remarks’, in *Early Christianity on the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks*, ed. by I. Garipzanov and O. Tolochko (Kiev: Institute of Ukrainian History, 2011), pp. 133–46 (pp. 134–36).

probing on behalf of the Rus in order to locate the best routes. By the second half of that century, it seems that the Rus had decided which routes were preferable and began using these more frequently.⁹

Then, we mentioned earlier, the route to Khazaria and along the coastline of the Caspian Sea southwards to the Islamic Caliphate, or via the Caspian Sea onwards to the Khurasan road, seem to have been mostly abandoned by the Rus around 900. Around this point in time the trade from the Caliphate to the northern regions began circulating east of the Caspian between northern Iran to the Volga Bulgars on the mid-Volga.¹⁰ However, as shown in chapter two the picture is significantly more complex since we are in possession of many reports on Rus in Khazaria after 900. Even though at this time the most voluminous trade took place at the Bulghar emporium in the mid-Volga region, Rus are reported to be involved in activities other than trade such as forming a special guard of the Khazar kaghan, conducting raids on the Caspian coastline and allying with local chieftains in inter-regional strife.

4.2 The Archaeological Evidence

The Scandinavian element is well represented in the archaeology of Eastern Europe, in fact so well that the number of artefacts unearthed there is much greater than that in the whole of Western Europe.¹¹ Scandinavian artefacts of the Viking Period have been found over a wide area from the Baltic in the west to the Caspian Sea in the south-east and from Ladoga and Beloozero in the north to the Lower Dniepr in the south (fig. 7). The earliest Scandinavian finds have been unearthed at Staraja Ladoga and are dated to the second half of the eight

⁹ 'Coins, Trade and the Origins of Ninth Century Rus' Towns', *Proceedings of the XII. Internationaler Numismatischer Kongress*, ed. by B. Kluge and B. Weisser (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2000), 934–942 (p. 936).

¹⁰ R. Kovalev discusses this and connected trade routes from various perspectives, including provision of goods, hunting techniques, modes of transport and other elements (R. Kovalev, 'The Infrastructure of the Northern Part of the "Fur Road" between the Middle Volga and the East during the Middle Ages', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 11 (2001), 25–64.

¹¹ F. Androshchuk, 'The Vikings in the East', in *The Viking World*, p. 517.

century.¹² But most prominent, both in terms of distribution and quantity, are finds from the tenth century.¹³ Further penetration eastwards is evidenced by important sites in the Volga-Oka basin.

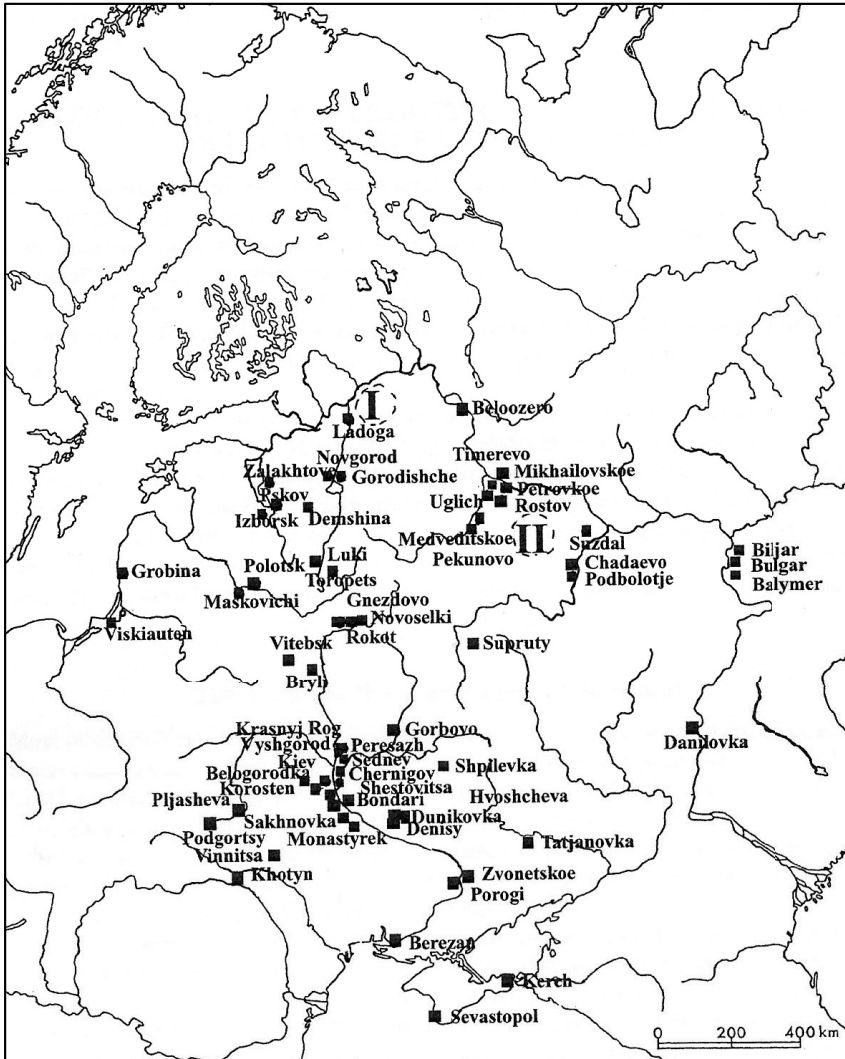


Figure 7. Locations of finds of Scandinavian character in Eastern Europe (from F. Androschuk, 'The Vikings in the East', p. 518).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 520.

¹³ T. Pushkina, 'Scandinavian Finds from Old Russia: A Survey of their Topography and Chronology', in *The Rural Viking in Russia and Sweden*, ed. by Pär Hansson (Örebro: Örebro Bildningsförvaltning, 1997), pp. 83–91 (p. 88).

Excavations at Sarskoe Gorodishche on Lake Nero have revealed both Scandinavian artefacts and Islamic coins dated to the 830s indicating the population's involvement in long-distance trade.¹⁴ The Timerëvo archaeological complex near Jaroslavl shows a similar combination with a large hoard of Islamic coins dated to c. 864/5 along with numerous oriental and Scandinavian objects.¹⁵

A great number of Scandinavian type objects have been found along and near the Dniepr and its tributaries. On the Desna river, Shestovitsa contains around thirty graves with clear Scandinavian traits in objects such as jewellery and weaponry which have been dated to the tenth century.¹⁶ Not far from this site lies Chernigov, where numerous Scandinavian artefacts have been found, including a little bronze statue interpreted as the god *Thor*.¹⁷ Near the modern city of Smolensk the archaeological complex of Gnëzdovo contains a huge cemetery estimated to number between 3000–5000 graves where more than 250 artefacts of Scandinavian character have been unearthed. Some of these objects have close parallels with objects in graves in central Sweden and in Denmark.¹⁸

Further east, in the region documented by Muslim geographers and historians in the ninth and tenth century, Scandinavian objects have also been discovered albeit in significantly less quantities. For instance, in and near Bulghar on the Volga a brooch and a scabbard chape was discovered. This type is decorated in the Jellinge style which emerged shortly before 900 and faded out towards the end of the tenth century,¹⁹ and a total of six swords and one shield-boss were found. One grave with distinct Scandinavian traits was excavated at nearby Balymer. Further south, in the Volgograd region, a bronze scabbard chape in the Jellinge style was found near the modern village of Danilovka.²⁰ The dating of these artefacts thus coincide with the Arabic sources regarding the presence of Scandinavians in and around Bulghar in the tenth century. Furthermore, Ingmar Jansson's survey of the chronology of Scandinavian finds in Eastern Europe clearly shows their preponderance in the period from the latter half of the ninth

¹⁴ W. Duczko, *Viking Rus*, p. 190.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 190–91.

¹⁶ F. Androshchuk, 'The Vikings in the East', p. 525.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 526; W. Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 161 and 181.

¹⁹ D. M. Wilson, 'The Development of Viking Art', in *The Viking World*, pp. 323–38 (p. 329).

²⁰ F. Androshchuk, 'The Vikings in the East', p. 523.

century to the end of the tenth century. Around 97% of the female brooches has been shown to belong to types characteristic of this period, and a similar pattern has been established for other groups of Scandinavian objects.²¹ Further evidence of Scandinavian presence in Eastern Europe is provided by runic material. Thus *Futhark* letters are found incised on diverse media such as stones, amulets and coins.

Furthermore, examining the distribution of some specific objects provides a more nuanced picture of the correspondence between finds in Eastern Europe and the Scandinavian lands. The female oval brooch of Scandinavian type is well represented over a wide area (fig. 8). However, given its uniform design and widespread usage all over Scandinavia it does not help us in identifying more precisely in which part of Scandinavia its carriers originated.²²

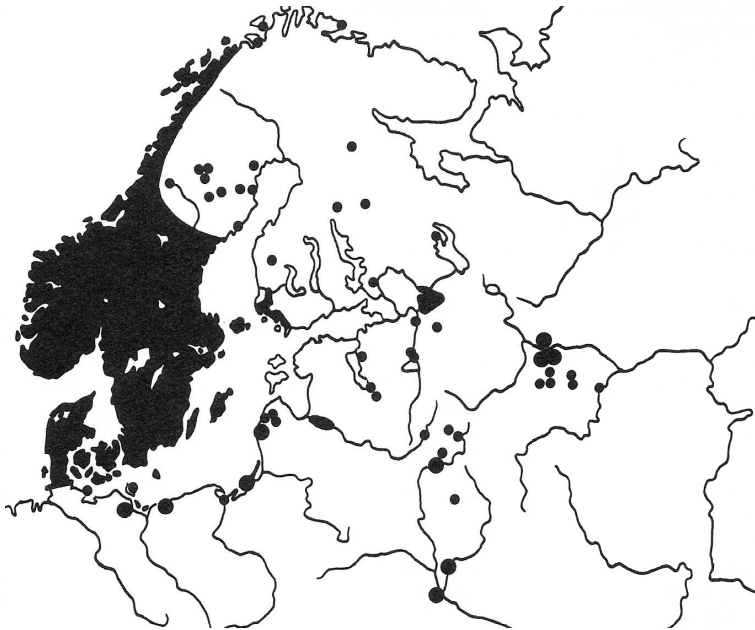


Figure 8. Distribution of Scandinavian female brooches made of bronze from the early and middle Viking period, i.e. from late eighth century to the late tenth century, according to Jansson's chronology (from I. Jansson, 'Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age', p. 777).

²¹ I. Jansson, 'Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age', p. 785.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 776–77. The exception are Gotlandic box-shaped and animal-head brooches, which are nevertheless exceedingly rare (*ibid.*, p. 781).

More informative in this context may be the so-called Thor's hammer rings (fig. 9) and clay paws, which both have significantly fewer areas of discovery in Scandinavia. Although it is problematic to conclude with any certainty whether they spread from west to east or vice versa, according to Ingmar Jansson, they do suggest, aligned with other material, that Scandinavian immigrants to the east came from central Sweden and Åland.²³

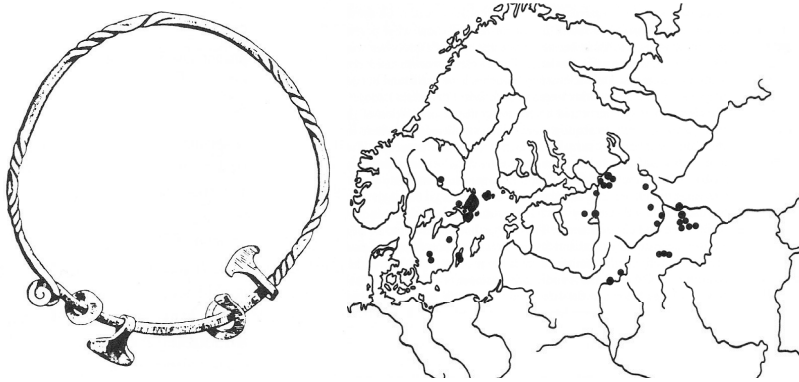


Figure 9. A Thor's hammer ring and its distribution in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (from I. Jansson, 'Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age', pp. 781-82).

On the whole, the archaeological evidence supports the account in the *Primary Chronicle* of Rus arriving from Scandinavia whereas numerous similarities exist between finds on the continent and the Scandinavian Peninsula and Gotland. The number and distribution of objects of Scandinavian character also indicates that their main area of influence was on a roughly North-South axis between Ladoga and the Black Sea, with important extensions into the upper Volga region and the Volga-Oka basin towards the headwaters of the Don. However, the scarcity of Scandinavian finds in the more easterly regions may at first seem to be at some variance with the evidence of the numerous Arabic reports of the Rus in that area which was presented in chapter two.

Several suggestions may be ventured to account for this situation. First of all, what is it that we should be looking for and why would the artefacts we are

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 784-85.

looking for necessarily resemble those found in Scandinavia? It is perfectly possible for social groups to rapidly adapt themselves to their environment, be it with regard to role and function, attire or weaponry. A possible case in point here may be the excavation of several Turkic warrior outfits at Birka, reported by the Swedish archaeologist Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson (see below in this chapter). The Rus guards of the Khazar kaghan, for instance, may have been distinguishable for Al-Mas'udi on grounds other than their accessories, for instance through language, customs or placement within the city of Atil.²⁴ Finally, the main reason may lie in the reduced number of actual Rus individuals and groups, as indirectly yet consistently indicated to us by the Arabic writers. The picture they convey is one of few but potent or impactful bands of merchants and occasionally warriors or guards. For comparison it may be noted that in the Iberian peninsula, for instance, where Scandinavian presence is documented and commonly accepted by scholars, only a single find has come to light.²⁵ Such a situation is even more pronounced in France where surprisingly few objects have come to light.²⁶ Thus, the mere fact that Scandinavian artefacts have been found in this region may give further credence to the information contained in the Arabic sources.

4.2.1 Coins

As has been mentioned earlier, the single most important item of the trade with which the Rus are connected are Arabic silver coins, or dirhams, which they accepted in exchange for their goods. The flow of dirhams from the Islamic lands into Europe was enormous. Of the total of almost 1660 hoards containing nearly half a million Islamic coins discovered in Europe, northern Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, more than 80% have been found in Europe.

²⁴ This can to some extent be understood from Al-Mas'udi's description (see chapter three, section 2.4.2).

²⁵ A small box made of deer horn intricately carved in the mid-tenth century Mammen style, preserved in the Museo de la Colegiata de San Isidro in Leon (E. M. Romero, 'San Isidoro-æskén i León', in *Vikingerne på Den Iberiske Halvø*, pp. 118–24).

²⁶ Some explanation can be found in the fact that metal-detecting is illegal in France. In countries where it is legal, for instance England, Denmark and Sweden, many important finds have come to light, especially in the past decades.

During the ninth and tenth centuries, and into the early eleventh century, dirhams poured almost continuously into eastern and northern Europe, although this was at different rates in different periods. Thomas Noonan has concluded that while a portion of this great number of coins (certainly many hundreds of thousands and possibly millions) would have been obtained through raids, bribes, payments to mercenaries and other non-commercial factors, most of them were accrued through trade.²⁷

Over these two centuries there are notable periods of ebb and flow. For the ninth century, Noonan has identified two periods of significantly diminished import ('silver-crisis') and again shortly after the mid tenth century. Quite early in the eleventh century, dirhams more or less cease to be imported into Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. On the whole, many more dirhams belong to the tenth century than to the ninth. As we mentioned earlier, around 900 the main trade routes from the Caliphate to the northern lands switched from the Caucasus and the western coast of the Caspian Sea to the Samanid realms east of it. This change is very well represented in the numismatic evidence. Noonan estimated that some 125,000,000 Samanid dirhams were imported into northern Europe during the course of the tenth century alone. Calculated at the average weight of three grams, the total amounts to 375 tons, or 3.75 tons per year on average.²⁸

However, the first half of the tenth century stands out in comparison with all other periods as climactic in the number of dirhams making their way from the

²⁷ T. Noonan, 'The Monetary History of Kiev in the Pre-Mongol Period', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, vol XI, no 3/4 (1987), 384–443 (p. 392). For a thorough discussion of the circumstances of the appearance of dirhams in Eastern Europe see T. S. Noonan, 'Why Dirhams First Reached Russia: The Role of Arab–Khazar Relations in the Development of the Earliest Islamic Trade with Eastern Europe', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, vol. 4 (1984), 151–282. See also Noonan's articles in *The Islamic World, Russia and the Vikings, 750–900: The Numismatic Evidence*, Variorum Collected Studies Series (Ashgate: Variorum, 1998). A recent overview with useful periodization is C. Kilger, 'Kaupang from afar: Aspects of the Interpretation of Dirham Finds in Northern and Eastern Europe between the Late 8th and Early 10th Centuries', in *Means of exchange: dealing with silver in the Viking Age*, ed. by D. Skre, Kaupang Excavation Project Publication Series, vol. 2 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), pp. 199–252. A comprehensive bibliography is the *Numismatics of the Islamic World* series, published by Institut für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften an der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt.

²⁸ T. Noonan, 'The Tenth-Century Trade of Volga Bulgharia with Samanid Central Asia', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 11 (2000–2001), 167–94 (p. 206). While these numbers are huge, R. Kovalev has pointed out that the size of the Samanid economy makes them plausible, they are in fact only 2.7% of its annual budget (R. Kovalev, 'The Mint of al-Shash: The Vehicle for the Origins and Continuation of Trade Relations Between Viking-Age Northern Europe and Samanid Central Asia', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 12 (2002–2003), 46–78 (p. 47)).

Islamic lands to Europe. Noonan estimated that 77.5% of all Samanid dirhams found in northern Europe had been imported there by the 950s, a clear indication of the paramountcy of this period in the context of trade.²⁹ Moreover, some of the more prolific mints, such as Balkh, Bukhara, Samarqand and Al-Shash, seem to have struck dirhams which were specifically intended for the trade with the northern lands.³⁰

In the Arabic material, alongside the important role of the Khazar and Bulghar emporia, it is above all the Rus who are connected with the acquisition of dirhams. This is vividly portrayed in the passage from Ibn Fadlan's account quoted above on how hoops of gold and silver are made for Rus women to show of their husbands' financial and social worth, according to the ratio of one hoop per every ten thousand dirhams. It is important also to note in this context that dirham finds in England are concentrated in areas of Scandinavian settlement.³¹

Indeed the timing of Ibn Fadlan's visit to Bulghar in 922 coincides with the heyday of the flow of silver coins of the first half of the tenth century and the numbers he mentions are not too far out of keeping with Noonan's theory. If several among them had several tens of thousands of dirhams, the total number would soon have reached a figure similar to that estimated by Noonan of 1,250,000 coins per year.

The magnitude of this trade – nicely illustrated by the sheer number of hoards with Islamic coins in Eastern and Northern Europe (fig. 10) – is indicative not only of exclusively mercantile transactions, it also implies cultural contacts and interaction on a significant scale as we already addressed in chapter one. What is furthermore of interest in that context is that in addition to the exchange of goods for silver, some of the coins display more specific indicators of the experiences of their carrier in the form of incisions. This allows us, in Ulla

²⁹ T. Noonan, 'The Tenth-Century Trade', p. 213–17. *Idem.*, 'Scandinavians in European Russia', in *Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by P. Sawyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 134.

³⁰ R. Kovalev, 'The Mint of al-Shash', p. 52. Also *idem.*, 'Dirham Mint Output of Samanid Samarqand and its Connection to the Beginnings of Trade with Northern Europe (10th century)', *Histoire and Mesure*, no. XVII, 3/4 (2002), 197–216 (pp. 2 and 5).

³¹ R. Naismith, 'Islamic Coins from Early Medieval England', *Numismatic Chronicle*, no. 165 (2005), 193–222 (p. 208).

Welin's words, to "catch a glimpse of the human being behind an accumulated treasure [...] or a former or later hoarder or owner."³²

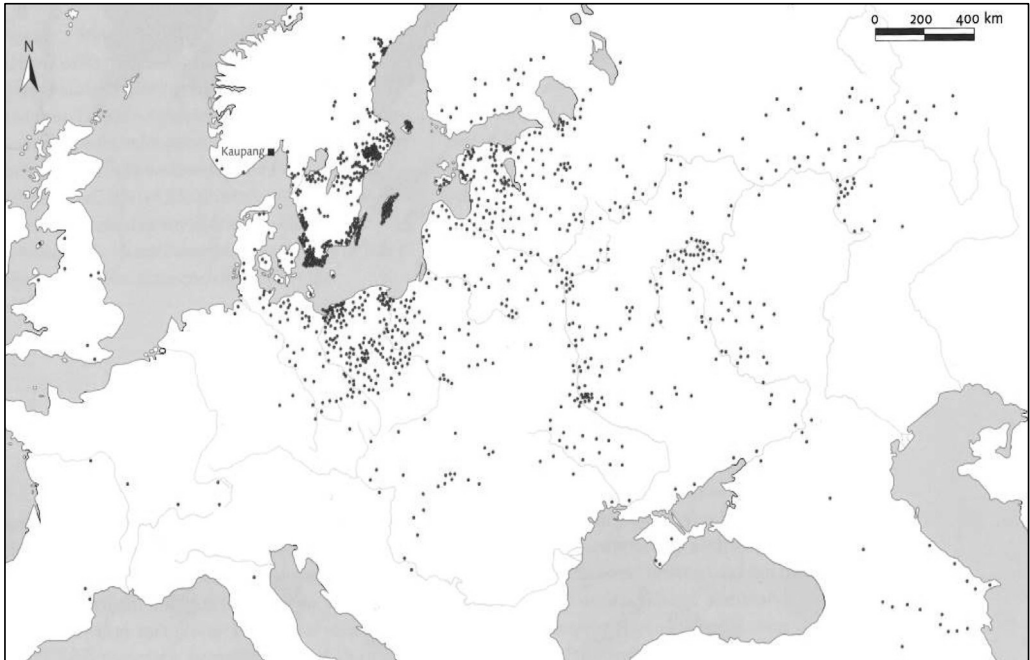


Figure 10. Distribution of hoards containing Islamic coins in Europe and Eurasia. Map, Elise Naumann, based on Jansson (1988, p. 570, fig. 2). (from *Means of Exchange: Dealing with Silver in the Viking Age*, ed. by D. Skre, Kaupang Excavation Project Publication Series, vol. 2 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), p. 201.)

Before we examine this type of evidence more closely, we shall consider some important objects that circulated on the trade routes where Rus were active. These display symbolic or artistic characteristics that, for a lack of a better collective term, we may designate as 'oriental', especially Turkic, Islamic and Persian.

³² Ulla S. Linder Welin, 'Graffiti on Oriental Coins in Swedish Viking Age Hoards', *Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet i Lund Årsberättelse*, no III (1955–6), 149–71 (p. 149).

4.3 Oriental Currents on the Trade Routes

The subject of oriental imports to Scandinavia was discussed already in the early twentieth century by the Swedish archaeologist T.J. Arne. When Arne published his work in 1914, Russian archaeologists had recently discovered and begun excavating the site of Saltovo in southern Russia. The earliest results of their work indicated strong resemblances in its material culture to sites located in a vast area ranging from the northern Caucasus to the Viatka river just north of where the Volga turns southwards.³³ In more than a century of excavations and research of this material culture several sites have been discovered, especially through the labours of Russian archaeologists Mikhail Artamonov and Svetlana Pletnova. This material culture now generally known as the Saltovo-Maiatsk (or Saltovo-Mayaki) culture. The dating of sites and artefacts corresponds largely with our knowledge of the Khazars from the written sources and it is thought to represent the “super-ethnic Khazarian ‘state’ culture integrating ‘diverse ethnic and cultural territories of [the – T.J.H.] Khazarian Kaghanate””.³⁴

Arne identified this region and coastline around the Caspian Sea as a potential source for a considerable number of oriental objects unearthed in Sweden. Motifs and shape of various items are parallel with ornamented objects from this region. This includes items such as belt buckles, pendants and bracelets, most of which the author grouped under a broad denomination of post-Sassanid artefacts due to his opinion that the region was under heavy Persian influence.³⁵

An updated comprehensive overview of material evidence of eastern design or provenance was made by Ingmar Jansson in 1988 who focussed on imported oriental objects unearthed in Sweden and more broadly in Scandinavia and the

³³ T. J. Arne, *La Suède et l'Orient: Études Archeologiques sur les Relations de la Suède et de l'Orient pendant l'âge des Vikings* (Uppsala: Appelberg, 1914), p. 95.

³⁴ V. Petrukhin, 'Epilogue', in S. Pletnova, *Ocherki Khazar'skoi Arheologii* (Jerusalem: Gesharim, 1999/Moscow: Mosty Kultury, 1999), 231–38 (p. 232).

³⁵ Arne, *La Suède et l'Orient*, pp. 117–76. See also C. Hedenstierna-Jonson and Lena Holmquist Olausson, 'The Oriental Mounts from Birka's Garrison: An Expression of Warrior Rank and Status', *Antikvariskt Arkiv*, no 81 (2006), 1–101 (p. 6).

Baltic.³⁶ The advances made by decades of archaeological research in both the Soviet Union and Sweden enabled Jansson to provide a more specific attribution of some of the material already discussed by Arne, as well as to include new findings in his study. By then the identity of particular Khazar and Volga Bulghar remains had become clearer and may be seen to substitute a part of Arne's 'post-Sassanid' category.³⁷ Apart from the Arabic dirhams which we will turn to shortly, Jansson's work surveyed artefacts carrying Arabic or pseudo-Arabic inscriptions such as bronze vessels from Sweden and Åland, some of which were apparently used as containers for coins and probably made in the tenth century (fig. 11).

A richly ornamented censer with an Arabic religious inscription was unearthed in Åbyn in Gästrikland, possibly made in the ninth century in Khorasan (fig. 12), and a ring with stylised Arabic letters reading 'Allah' (fig. 13).



Figure 11. Bronze vessel from Birka with Arabic inscription near the neck of the bottle (from 'Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien', p. 625).

³⁶ I. Jansson, 'Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien', in *Oldenburg - Wolin - Staraja Ladoga - Novgorod - Kiev: Handel und Handelsverbindungen in südlichen und östlichen Ostseeraum während des frühen Mittelalters, Internationale Fachkonferenz der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft vom 5–9 Oktober 1987 in Kiel*, Römisch-Germanische Kommission des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, vol. 69 (1988), 564–647.

³⁷ The Sassanids were the last Persian lineage of rulers to achieve hegemony over much of Western Asia before Islam, ruled 224 CE–651 CE. See, for instance, M. Morony, 'Sasanids', *EI2*, pp. 70–83.

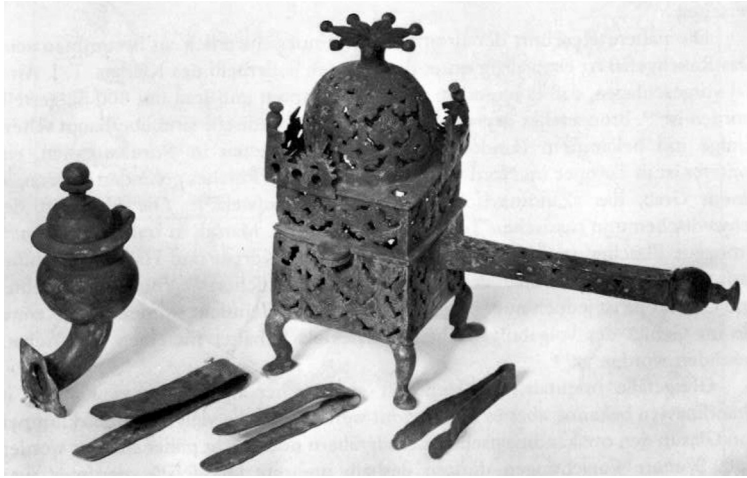


Figure 12. Objects of Islamic design. Censer (height: 33 cm), tongs and possibly a piece of an oil lamp *c.* 970, from Åbyn. Museum of Gävleborg, Gävle (from ‘Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien’, p. 624).

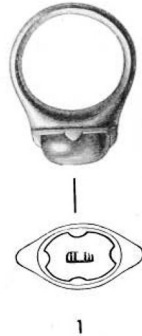


Figure 13. A silver ring with ‘Allah’ inscribed on amethyst. Birka, grave 515 (from ‘Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien’, p. 579).

Of special interest here are also objects with direct relevance to the very activity which brought them all these distances.. These include balances and weights that have been discovered in large numbers. Although such balances have been found over a wide area in Europe, Jansson believes they originate in the Islamic caliphate.³⁸ The pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on the weights (fig. 14, items no. 3 and 6) also point eastwards as does the stylised falcon on the top left bowl. In

³⁸ I. Jansson, ‘Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien’, p. 574–5.

Birka, several graves dated to *c.* 890–930 contained weights belonging to the Islamic weight system. Indeed some scholars have even suggested that the weight system in parts of Scandinavia was influenced by it.³⁹

Unique among these finds is a bell-shaped, ornamented pendant from a woman's grave at Birka (fig. 15). This item had earlier been classified as Persian but can now be compared with similar objects from finds in the Volga Bulghar region. Jansson suggests that such an item may stem from the steppe nomads or the Islamic caliphate, or even both.⁴⁰ A sabretache of oriental design (fig. 16) was unearthed in Rösta in Jämtland in Sweden.

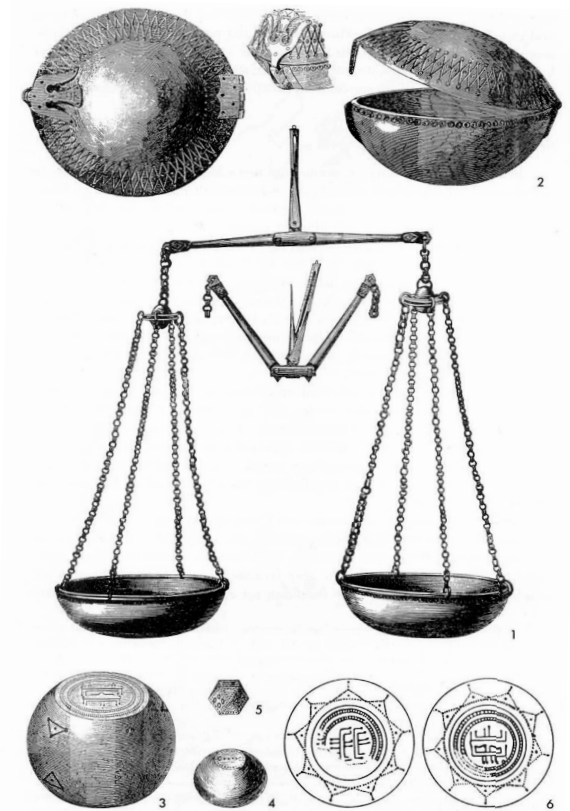


Figure 14. Balances and weights found in Sweden and on Gotland, with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions (from ‘Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien’, p. 575).

³⁹ E. Sperber, *Balances, Weights and Weighting in Ancient and Early Medieval Sweden*, Theses and Papers in Scientific Archaeology 2 (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1996), pp. 104–7.

⁴⁰ I. Jansson, ‘Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien’, p. 580.

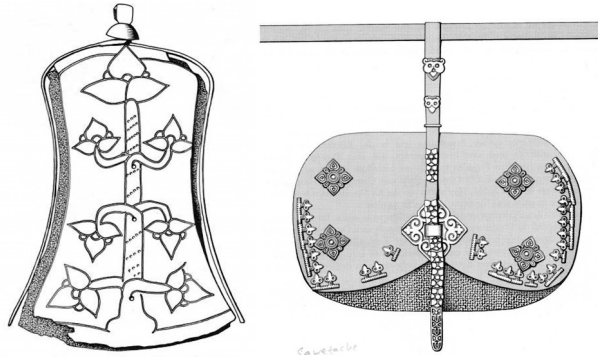


Figure 15. Oriental pendant from Birka (grave 464) and a sabretache of oriental design from Rösta, Ås, Jämtland (from 'Wikingzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien', pp. 580 and 613 respectively).

Another group of objects of similar origins are belt mounts (fig. 16) which have been found in a wide area mainly in Sweden and then mostly in the eastern central regions and Gotland (fig. 17 shows the distribution of these artefacts in the early and middle period of the Viking age (left) and the late period (right))⁴¹. Furthermore, the numerous mounts discovered in Birka which date to the ninth and tenth centuries have been studied in detail by Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and Lena Holmquist Olausson who agreed with Jansson's attribution and Arne's before him that they are decidedly of an oriental origin or design. Hedenstierna-Jonsson points to specific parallels between these mounts and such objects in the Volga Bulghar material, especially the large Tankeev (or Tankeevka) cemetery.⁴²

⁴¹ The early period refers to the second half of the eighth century to the second half of the ninth century, the middle period until the end of the tenth century and the final period to c. 1100 (I. Jansson, *Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age*, p. 774).

⁴² C. Hedenstierna-Jonson and L. H. Olausson, 'The Oriental Mounts from Birka's Garrison', p. 20.



Figure 16. Mounts of oriental provenance or design found in Sweden and on Gotland (from I. Jansson, *Wikingerzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien*, p. 611).

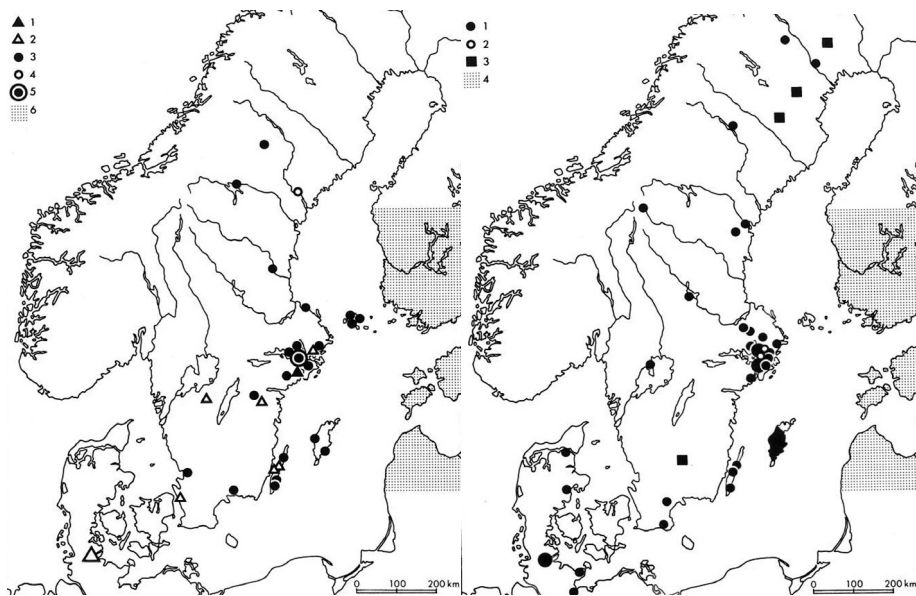


Figure 17. Distribution of mounts of oriental provenance unearthed in Scandinavia (from I. Jansson, 'Wikingerzeitlicher Orientalischer Import in Skandinavien', pp. 608-9. The maps are significantly reduced here.)

Hedenstierna-Jonson and Olausson also regard the composite bow and the oriental mounts found in the garrison at Birka as “key evidence in the question of the identity and cultural affiliations of Birka’s warriors.” They conclude that along with other artefacts, weapons and equipment, the mounts indicate a complete attire of an eastern warrior, suggesting a close connection with the mounted warrior of the steppe nomads.⁴³ To this can be added Jansson’s opinion that “the Scandinavian warrior class in Russia adopted oriental dress fashions as a result of their wars and other contacts with the Turkic and Islamic world”.⁴⁴

Beads form another important type of archaeological evidence, and have been unearthed in large numbers over a wide area.⁴⁵ As with the dirhams, we are informed by Ibn Fadlan that they were also among the objects the Rus traded in and that they were highly valued:

The jewellery which they prize the most is the dark ceramic beads which they have aboard their boats and which they value very highly: they purchase beads for a dirham a piece and string them together as necklaces for their wives.⁴⁶

Although it is often problematic to identify the provenance of beads, certain types made of cornelian and rock crystal that have been discovered in large quantities especially in Russia, Ukraine and Sweden, were imported there from the lands of Islam (fig. 18).⁴⁷

⁴³ C. Hedenstierna-Jonson’s, *The Birka Warrior: the Material Culture of a Martial Society*, doctoral thesis (Stockholm University, 2006), p. 68.

⁴⁴ I. Jansson, ‘Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age’, p. 799.

⁴⁵ Beads abound among the Volga Bulghar archaeological finds, where the Tankeev cemetery alone yielded around ten thousand pieces from 273 graves (R. Kovalev, ‘The Infrastructure of the Northern Part of the “Fur Road”’, p. 32).

⁴⁶ *Risalah*, p. 150–51, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ I. Jansson, ‘Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age’, p. 794. A thorough overview of their provenance is in J. Callmer, *Trade Beads and Bead Trade ca. 800–1000 A.D.*, Acta Archaeologica Lundensia series in 4°, no. 11 (Bonn/Lund: Rudolf Habelt/Gleerup, 1977), p. 94–108.

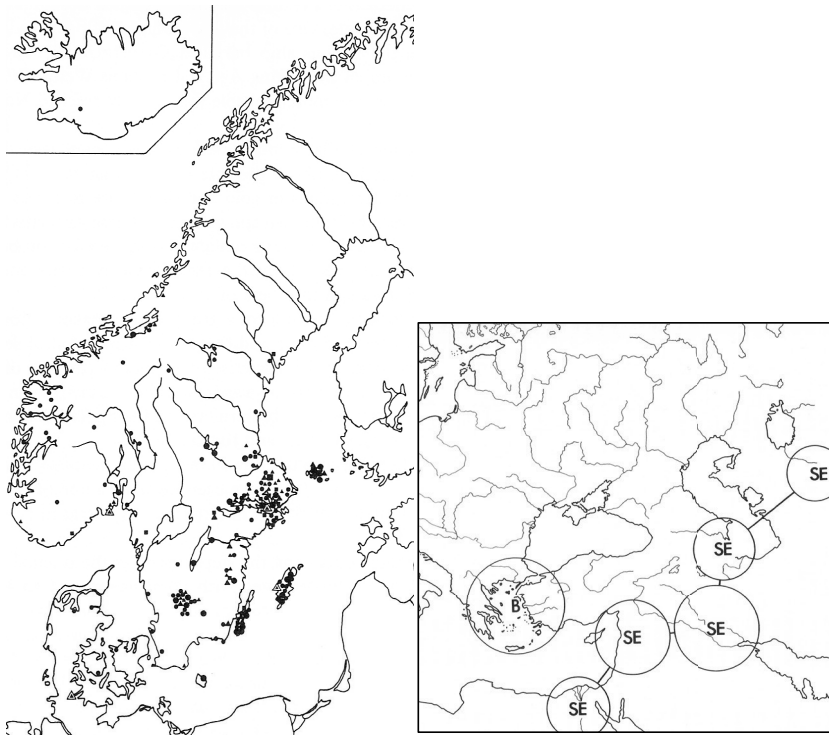


Figure 18. Distribution and provenance of beads. (Left) The distribution of beads of oriental provenance in Scandinavia (from I. Jansson, 'Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age', p. 795). (Right) Places of provenance of oriental beads found in Scandinavia (from J. Callmer, *Trade Beads and Bead Trade ca. 800-1000 A.D.*, p. 98).

Finally, mention should be made of two objects that are also interesting in this context. The first is an unusual brooch discovered in Elets (fig. 19) near the headwaters of the Don in the Voronezh region. The piece is remarkable above all for its size (about 13 cm) and weight as it was made mostly of silver, partially gilt and embellished with niello. The brooch's pin arrangement and ornament is in keeping with the Scandinavian tradition of brooch making, yet archaeologists agree that some elements of it are either Byzantine or 'oriental', and some elements appear to be without parallel.⁴⁸ It can be compared with Anglo-Scandinavian brooches studied by Jane Kershaw, not in terms of appearance, but of function and meaning. These brooches are of Anglo-Saxon manufacture, but

⁴⁸ H. Arbman, *Skandinavisk Handverk i Russland zur Wikingerzeit*, Meddelanden från Lunds Universitets Historiska Museum (Lund: Lund University, 1960), p. 120 seq., figs. 2.-6 and 10; I. Jansson, 'Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age', p. 780; W. Duczko, *Viking Rus*, p. 185-86.

portray Scandinavian design features.⁴⁹ The concurrence of such elements in one and the same piece is a vivid example of cultural contacts, and the item gives us an idea of how acculturation found expression in objects of art.



Figure 19. A large and unusual brooch from Elets, Voronezh region, Russia (from W. Duczko, *Viking Rus*, fig. 51a).

The last object to be mentioned here is a triangular bronze bowl found at Hedeby among other objects in a man's grave. The bowl contains an inscription in Turkic, translated into German by Heiko Steuer based on the interpretation of the Hungarian Janos Jarmatta as "Erwäge [einen] Rat: Trinke – heiss liebe! Befolge!" or "Consider [this] advice: Drink! Love ardently! Obey!"⁵⁰ Further information regarding the type of Turkic appearing in the inscription has unfortunately not been obtained, and its exact provenance is not certain.

This brief overview of artefacts originating in the orient, or made under the influence of oriental motifs or designs, shows first and foremost that they were of widely varying character and that they relate to many aspects of the society and the trade that brought them there. Unfortunately, these artefacts have rarely been

⁴⁹ J. Kershaw, 'Culture and Gender in the Danelaw: Scandinavian and Anglo-Scandinavian Brooches', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, no. 5 (2009), 295-325 (pp. 310–319).

⁵⁰ Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 85–86 and note 1. Heiko Steuer, 'Eine dreieckige Bronzeschale aus Haithabu bei Schleswig', *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt*, no. 3 (1975), 89–93.

discussed outside the archaeological context. Egil Mikkelsen's recent discussion of such objects found in Scandinavia,⁵¹ was expressly intended to contrast with earlier interpretations of T. J. Arne and I. Jansson, as to examining the possibility of ideological and religious influence in Scandinavia associated with them and not only trade.⁵² It is, however, somewhat puzzling that the author seems to consider Islam as the only cultural phenomena to consider in this regard. By doing so, Mikkelsen mostly ignores the potential influence made by the autonomous traditions and beliefs and customs of the Khazars as well as the Volga Bulgars.⁵³ It is true that Islam played an important part in both areas, and that the Volga Bulgars had adopted Islam as their official religion. However it is apparent that their Turkic (and Altaic) traditions and heritage lived on. In chapter three we have discussed in some detail how the influence of these cultures can be deduced from Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus. We have seen in this chapter that many of the items excavated on the trade routes and in Scandinavia over the last century or so can demonstrably be linked with archaeological finds in the region where the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars subsisted. And this was precisely through which the easternmost part of the Rus trading network lay in the ninth and tenth centuries.

⁵¹ In two contributions: 'Islam and Scandinavia during the Viking Age', pp. 39–52, and 'The Vikings and Islam', pp. 543–49.

⁵² E. Mikkelsen, 'The Vikings and Islam', p. 545. This is in any case a somewhat curious statement, since Jansson had earlier both emphasised the social aspect of the contacts between Scandinavia and the East, and played down the importance of trade (I. Jansson, 'Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age').

⁵³ There are furthermore certain problems in Mikkelsen's treatment of the written sources such as his claim that people termed in Ibn Fadlan's account as *baranjar* is a rendering in Arabic of Old Norse *varingjar*, and that these people are connected with Islam by Ibn Fadlan is an indication that some Vikings known by this name became Muslims. Apart from the fact that the date of Ibn Fadlan's journey (921) significantly antedates the earliest instantiations of this name in Cedrenos Skylitzes from 1034 (cf. S. Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*), the normal rendering of *varing-* in Arabic attested by several writers is *warank*. Furthermore, there may be grounds for connecting this name to both a town with a similar name in Khazaria (see D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967) and the Mongolian word *bara'un gar* (Oguz. *baranggar*) meaning 'right hand, western or southwestern side; right flank of an army' (C. Schönig, *Mongolische Lehnwörter im Westogusischen* (Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 2000), p. 67).

4.4 Graffiti on Coins

Alongside the types of artefacts we have reviewed, the Arabic dirhams unearthed in a wide region stretching from the Caspian region to Scandinavia and dated primarily to the ninth and tenth century, may be regarded as significant evidence for cultural contacts and influence. First of all the coins themselves, with their ornate Arabic calligraphy and decorative features, can be seen as cultural media conveying their original message⁵⁴ to their new owners and carriers who brought them far and wide. The distribution of these coins (see fig. 10 above) clearly indicates that they traversed many different cultural zones along the trade routes of the western Eurasian continent. Furthermore, the written Arabic sources present a vivid picture of the multiculturalism of the main emporia in which these dirhams changed hands, such as in Atil in Khazaria and Bulghar on the Volga. It will also be argued that incisions or graffiti on these coins can illuminate the experience of their owners or carriers. Moreover, they may have a potential to constitute some fragmentary evidence of acculturation processes (see discussion on this concept and its ramifications in chapter one, section 1.4.4.1).

Until quite recently, coins with graffiti were considered exceedingly rare in proportion with the enormous quantities of known specimens. This can be evidenced by Ulla S. Linder Welin's study from the mid-twentieth century of twenty-eight graffiti coins as well as Dobrovolskij's catalogue from 1981 of coins found in Eastern Europe which includes eighty-five coins. However, a study by Gert Rispling and Inger Hammarberg's published in 1985, which examined approximately 34,000 oriental coins in the collections of the Royal Coin Cabinet in Stockholm, revealed a large number of previously unknown graffiti coins and brought the number of known examples up to 1173, or roughly tenfold.⁵⁵

Given their relatively reduced number in light of the hundreds of thousands of known coins, graffiti on Islamic dirham coins has in general neither received

⁵⁴ Dirhams are useful source material. Besides quotations from the Quran, they display the place and time of their minting, and sometimes a personal name or other more specific information.

⁵⁵ I. Hammarberg and G. Rispling, 'Graffiter på vikingatida mynt', *Hikuin*, no. 11 (1985), 63–78 (p. 63).

much attention from a numismatic point of view nor from a historical or philological one. In the earliest study dedicated to this subject, Welin examined graffiti on coins from around 200 hoards from 17 finds on Gotland (14) and mainland Sweden (3). He developed a system of categorization related to the function of the various incisions:

1. Incisions testing the quality of the material;
2. Lines intended for the partitioning of the coin;
3. Incisions in connection with distribution of a lot among its owners;
4. Owner's marks;
5. Magic or religious emblems, e.g. cross or symbols to protect a treasure;
6. General human scribbling-itch, artistic disposition.⁵⁶

This categorization was mostly accepted in the important study by I. Dobrovolskij, J. V. Dubov and J. K. Kuz'menko with the exception of the first two categories which are not really any meaningful graffiti. These authors suggested a different approach which relied on the actual type of inscription or image rather than the purpose of the incisions:

1. Oriental Inscriptions;
2. Runes;
3. Images of objects, e.g. weapons, boats etc.;
4. Symbols, religious or magical;
5. Undecipherable incisions.⁵⁷

These categories were accepted and employed by Hammarberg and Rispling. It may be argued that Dobrovolskij's model, being more descriptive, offers a more practical form of classification, while suggestions as to the purpose of the incisions are perhaps more prone to debate. Furthermore, the older model may be more liable to overlapping such as may arise from similarities between testing cuts and partitioning lines. In the following we will examine a few examples of dirham coins with graffiti that mainly falls under categories 1 and 4 according to

⁵⁶ U. S. Linder Welin, 'Graffiti on Oriental Coins', p. 150.

⁵⁷ I. Dobrovolskij, J. V. Dubov and J. K. Kuz'menko, 'Klassifizierung und Interpretation von Graffiti auf orientalischen Münzen', *Zeitschrift für Archäologie*, no. 15 (1981), 217–41 (p. 220 seq.).

Dobrovolskij's model, oriental inscriptions and religious or magical symbols. The latter category could also be termed 'symbols relating to the spiritual world'.

4.4.1 Oriental Inscriptions

Although rare among dirhams with graffiti, a number of them contain what is termed here for sake of convenience 'oriental' inscriptions. These are made with Arabic lettering, in one case what is believed to be Turkic runes, several examples of Georgian and possibly Armenian and possibly one with Hebrew letters. Welin's survey from 1956 already included two coins with Arabic graffiti. The first one (without graphic representation) is a corroded Abbasid dirham minted in the year 770 in Al-Abbasiyah which contains an inscription which is probably to be read *ta'ala*, an expression for Allah's majesty with the meaning 'exalted be He'. This expression appears, for example, in surah 20: 113 of the Quran. Welin infers that aside the obvious religious connotations, such an exclamation may also have had some magical sense.⁵⁸ The second inscribed coin in Welin's study (fig. 20) is a Samanid dirham from Samarkand minted 922/3 which was found in Gotland. Due to the absence of diacritic marking it is possible to read the letters in at least two ways: *sabli* or *sajli*. Both alternatives appear to have plausible semantic references to the context in which they appear. The former derives from a verb meaning 'to count, or pay out' where the noun means 'counted money' or simply 'money in cash'. The long *-i* suffix could be the first person enclitic possessive pronoun where the meaning would be 'my lot, my money'. The second word can be translated as 'share, portion, gift' with the pronominal suffix meaning 'my share'.

⁵⁸ U. S. Linder Welin, 'Graffiti on Oriental Coins', p. 158.

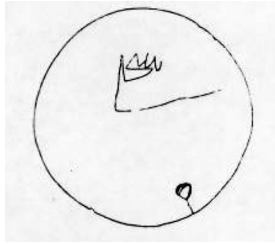


Figure 20. A drawing of a Samanid dirham (minted 922/3) with an Arabic inscription (probably *sabli* or *sajli*).

Welin deduced that such inscriptions most likely had an oriental provenance, although she does not elaborate any further on this idea. Although it is impossible to establish where such an inscription was made, we can nevertheless consider places outside of the Caliphate considering the crude lettering. Omeljan Pritsak proposed that both Scandinavian runes and Arabic letters may have been employed in the northern parts of the trade route and, further, that an adaptation of a system of classification of the quality or value of the coins was made after the Khazarian system which he believed had its origins in the Islamic Caliphate.⁵⁹ Unfortunately we lack written sources that might corroborate Pritsak's theory.

At any rate, some degree of Arabic literacy in the regions north of the Islamic lands can be inferred from our source material. For instance, we learn that some Muslims established themselves among the northern peoples that were engaged in a certain profession such as related to us by Ibn Fadlan who tells us that one of the tailors of the King of the Volga Bulgars was from Baghdad.⁶⁰ On a broader scale, the presence of Islam in Khazaria and the Islamization of the Volga Bulgars around 900 (discussed in chapter one) inevitably entailed some knowledge of Arabic. Similarly, we may include the imitative minting of Muslim coins, for example in Bulghar where the designer of the die would have been

⁵⁹ See this discussion in Pritsak's *The Origins of the Old Rus' Weights and Monetary Systems: Two Studies in Western Eurasian Metrology and Numismatics in the Seventh to Eleventh Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 62–65.

⁶⁰ "I went into my tent with one of the King's tailors, who was from Baghdad and who had happened to end up in this region, to converse." (*Risalah*, p. 124).

required to know some Arabic, grammar and orthography.⁶¹ In chapter two we already mentioned Ibn Al-Nadim's 'sample' of writing that is attributed to the Rus which appears to bear a slight resemblance to Arabic. Furthermore, a stone mould for casting belt ornaments found in Kiev, and dated to the tenth century, is inscribed with a name in Arabic.⁶²

In addition to these indicators of Arabic literacy, it seems that Arabic lettering was also regarded as a mark of authenticity. In the case of the Samanid dirhams produced especially for export to Eastern Europe discussed above, the legend on the coins would have been unnecessary. Still, it was preserved, perhaps as a certificate of provenance, and therewith the quality of their silver content. This can be compared to gold and silver ingots today that usually bear several marks of authenticity. In this context, it is probable that the motivation behind some of the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions (as in the case of the balances and weights above) was to create a perception of authenticity and authority associated with the script. The decorative usage of dirhams as pendants and in necklaces furthermore suggests that their design had an aesthetic appeal. At any rate, in the steady stream of dirhams with an Arabic legend to Eastern Europe, the Baltic, and Scandinavia, during the best part of the ninth and the tenth centuries, it is more than likely that these letters became well entrenched in the visual culture of their recipients and carriers.

The study of Dobrovolskij, Dubov and Kuz'menko from 1981 revealed eighty-five graffito coins, eight of which contained oriental inscriptions (fig. 21). Seven of these are thought to be in Arabic (one of which may also be Hebrew) and one in Georgian. The absence of diacritical marks and the sometimes nearly illegible letters render the words difficult for interpretation. The Georgian graffiti (fig. 21, no. 4) is thought to spell: 'Christianity'.

⁶¹ See G. Rispling, 'Coins with Crosses and Bird heads – Christian Imitations of Islamic Coins?', *Formvannen*, no. 82 (1987), 75–87 (pp. 80–81).

⁶² S. Franklin, *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus, c. 950–1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 116.

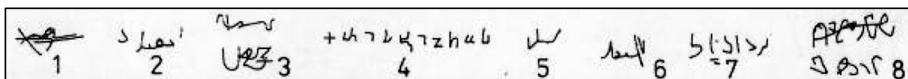


Figure 21. Oriental inscriptions on Coins. Arabic except for no 4 in Georgian (no. 7 is possibly Hebrew).⁶³

The important work of Hammarberg and Rispling increased the number of known coins with oriental inscriptions significantly with ten in Arabic and numerous instances of Georgian and Armenian ones which, in turn, lead to the assumption that they were made in or near the Caucasus region. Not all have been deciphered and some contain only individual letters the function and meaning of which we cannot be sure.⁶⁴

Of especial interest is a hoard of coins dated to the first decade of the ninth century unearthed at Peterhof near St Petersburg, which may possibly be related to the earliest ventures of Scandinavian peoples eastwards. Twenty out of eighty coins contained graffiti. Most are Scandinavian runes (13), one bears a Greek name (Zacharias), two of them have an Arabic inscription and four coins carry signs which have similarities only to inscriptions originating from the South of Eastern Europe and are thought to be Khazarian runes (fig. 22).⁶⁵ As we would expect in this period, the composition of the hoard is different from those appearing later in the ninth century and the tenth century, which show a predominance of the Samanid mints as we discussed above. The incised coins in the Peterhof hoard are all Abbasid dirhams, struck at several locations between 776/7–792/3.⁶⁶

Jonathan Shepard has pointed out in the context of the geography of the earliest phase of trade connecting with Khazaria and the Islamic lands instead of

⁶³ I. Dobrovolskij et al., 'Klassifizierung und Intrepretation von Graffiti', p. 221.

⁶⁴ Hammarberg and Rispling, 'Graffiter på vikingatida mynt', p. 70.

⁶⁵ E. A. Melnikova, A. B. Nikitin and A. V. Fomin, 'Graffiti na kuficheskikh monetakh Petergofskogo klada nachala IX v. [Graffiti on the Coins from the Petershof Hoard (Early 9th Century)]', in V.T. Pashuto (ed.), *Drevnejschie gosudarstva na territorii SSSR: Materialy i issledovaniya* (Moskva: Nauka, 1982), pp. 26–47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Byzantium, that the occurrence of Greek lettering does not necessarily point to Byzantium but rather to east orthodox Christians in Khazaria. This group was numerous enough to be allotted a metropolitanate by the Constantinopolitan authorities.⁶⁷ If that is the case, such a collection in one place is an important indicator of the multiculturalism of the trade emporia in which the Rus, or perhaps their earliest probing contingents, participated, and to some extent also of the various trade routes connected with them.⁶⁸

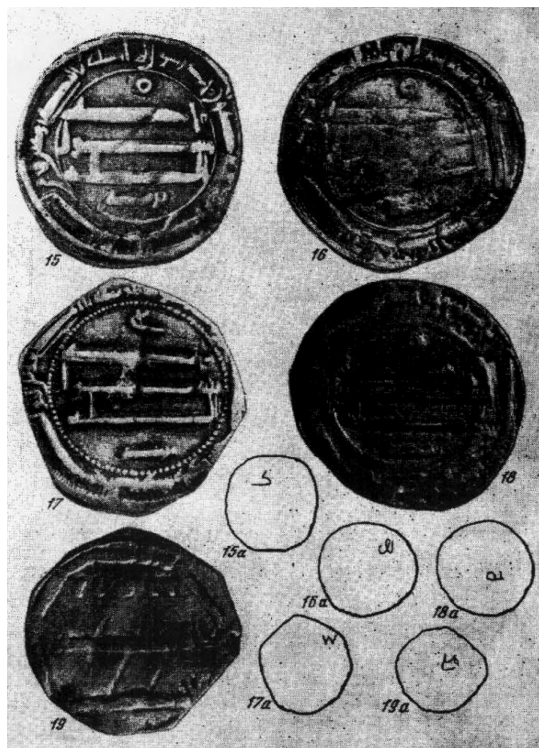


Figure 22. Dirhams from the Peterhof hoard with Turkic runes (from Melnikova et al., 1982, p. 46, coins nos. 15-19).

⁶⁷ J. Shepard, 'The Viking Rus and Byzantium', in *The Viking World*, pp. 496–516 (pp. 496–97).

⁶⁸ See our discussion in chapter two on the appearance of the name Rus in the Arabic sources, section 2.2.

4.4.2 Symbols relating to the spiritual world

Symbols of various kinds are a much more common type of graffiti on coins than incisions of words. However, they can be more problematic to interpret than letterings which, at least, we are able to connect with one alphabet or another. Due to the vast amount of symbols appearing on these coins, this section will only examine a few symbols that bear resemblance with imagery found in the archaeological material from the region encompassed by the Khazars. In this context the archaeological culture of Saltovo-Maiatsk is especially important as it is believed to contain the most representative material remains of Khazar culture.⁶⁹

The first set of symbols is the so-called solar or sun symbols. As can be expected from the primitive methods of incision, often probably made with the tip of a knife or similar instrument, their graphic representation appears in various guises from the familiar simplistic depiction of the sun to the more abstract form of a swastika (fig. 23).

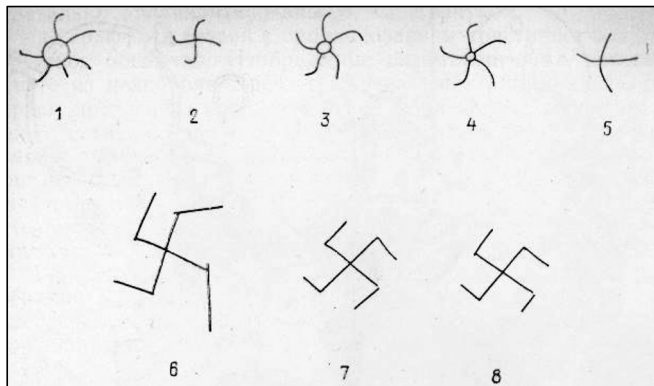


Figure 23. Solar symbols and swastikas incised on coins unearthed in Russia (finding place unknown, from I. Dobrovolskij, J. V. Dubov and J. Kuz'menko, *Graffiti na vostochnykh monetakh: Drevnaya Rus' i sopredel'nye strany* (Leningrad: Leningr. Universitet, 1991) p. 75).

⁶⁹ S. Pletnova, *Očerki khazar'skoi arheologii* (Jerusalem: Gesharim, 1999/Moskva: Mosty Kultury, 1999), pp. 7–23.

Dobrovolskij rightly pointed out that the use of this symbol in earlier periods was widespread and that pinpointing a location of origin is difficult. Versions of this symbol appear indeed to have been used all over the Eurasian continent. The authors connect the symbol with the hammer of Thor from Old Norse mythology which, they argue, can be supported by the fact that the name of one the Icelandic magical runes in the shape of a swastika was called *þórshamar*.⁷⁰ This evidence is however significantly later than the period under discussion. Hammarberg and Rispling also report two dirhams with a swastika but without providing any further interpretation.⁷¹ On this last dirham the symbol appears alongside the word *kuth* written in Scandinavian runes three times. Welin's survey includes one such coin again without further interpretation.⁷²

Dobrovolskij, Dubov, and Kuz'menko, however, also allow for a different line of interpretation by comparing these signs with one of the letters of the Turkic runic alphabet and a symbol found in Sarkel (modern Belaya Vezha on the Don).⁷³ The fact that these symbols were scratched on coins around the same time as they were in use in the Saltovo-Maiatsk region provides some support for this connection. However, their universality detracts us from making any definite conclusions in this respect.

Of possible interest also is a sign reminiscent of a stylised branch or a tree appearing on coin no. 42 in Hammarberg and Rispling's catalogue (fig. 21). This symbol, briefly described by Hammarberg and Rispling as 'rune like' or as a housemark, bears a certain resemblance to symbols carved on amulets and game pieces belonging to the Saltovo-Maiatsk culture. These were examined by the Russian archaeologist V. E. Flyorova and interpreted as representing the Khazar

⁷⁰ I. Dobrovolski et al., 'Klassifizierung und Interpretation von Graffiti', p. 231.

⁷¹ I. Hammarberg and G. Rispling, 'Graffiter på vikingatida mynt', pp. 72 and 74. These are coin no. 51, Shash 907, finding place unknown (p. 73), and coin no. 93, imitation c. 910–930, finding place unknown (p. 75).

⁷² U. S. Linder Welin, 'Graffiti on Oriental Coins', p. 168 (image p. 157). Coin no. 206, Muhammadiyah 763/4, unearthed on Gotland.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

mythological tree of life (see various representation of this motif in fig. 25 esp. nos. 4 and 16).⁷⁴

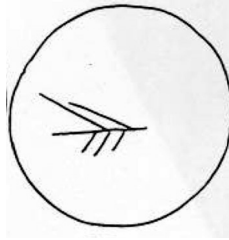


Figure 24. Abbasid dirham, al-Shash, 903 (from Hammarberg and Rispling, 1985, pp. 72-73).

Such objects are common on Saltovo-Maiatsk artefacts and this motif, as much as we can assume that the same symbol is intended, has a wide range of stylistic modification which can not be dealt with here. It is also possible that certain incisions found on coins may represent a more abstract version of this symbol, as well as lines cut on coins and traditionally interpreted as dividing lines. Again, however, here we are entering the grey area between categories of interpretation reviewed above.

The two symbols discussed here are merely the tip of the iceberg regarding motifs of graffiti on Arabic silver dirhams found in Northern and Eastern Europe.⁷⁵ An attractive feature of these two symbols is their simplicity and abstractness which makes them easy to remember and reproduce. This is a possible advantage over the comparison of more complex imagery such as weapons or banners which invites a host of nuances and possible interpretations.

⁷⁴ See V. E. Flyorova's two publications: *Obrazy i smysly mifologii Khazarii* [The Images and Themes of Khazarian Mythology] (Moskva: Gescharim, 2001) and *Reznaya kost': Ingo-vostoka Evropy IX–XII veka* [Carved Ivory: South–eastern Europe 9th–12th century] (St Petersburg: Aleteia, 2001).

⁷⁵ An overview of many more is provided in some of the works cited here, for instance I. Dobrovolskij, J. V. Dubov and J. K. Kuz'menko, 'Klassifizierung und Interpretation von Graffiti auf orientalischen Münzen'; I. Hammarberg and G. Rispling, 'Graffiti på vikingatida mynt'; Ulla S. Linder Welin, 'Graffiti on Oriental Coins in Swedish Viking Age Hoards'; and more recently E. Melnikova, *Skandinavskie runicheskie nadpisi: Nove nakhodki i interpretatsii* (Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 2001).

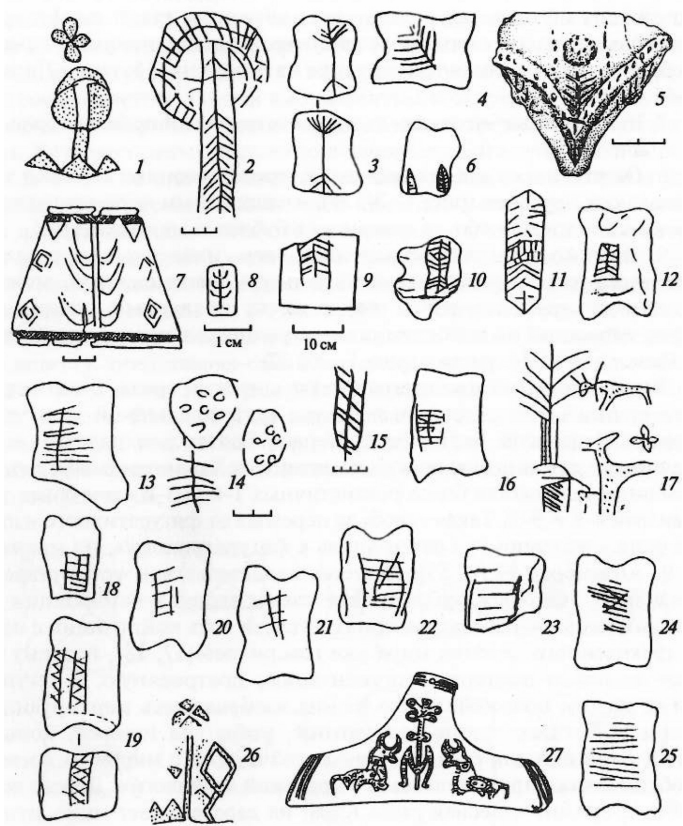


Figure 25. Amulets and game-pieces carved in bone from various Saltovo-Maiatsk sites (from V. Floyrova, *Obrazy i sinzhety mifologii Khazarii*, p. 139).

The connection that has been made in this chapter offers one possible path of interpretation. Hopefully more specimens will come to light that can be examined in search of further parallels or patterns.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have reviewed material evidence from the ninth and tenth century trade routes, stretching from the Caspian Sea and the mid-Volga region to Scandinavia, on which the Rus are reported to be active. Several conclusions can be drawn from this discussion.

First of all, we have seen that throughout most of western Eurasia, the Scandinavian element, with which we connect the accounts of the Rus in the Arabic sources, is widely represented with objects discovered as far east as the lower Volga region. Likewise, at the other end of the trade network, there is a marked presence of artefacts of oriental provenance that have been excavated. Numerous artefacts unearthed in Scandinavia and the Baltic show resemblances and parallels with material evidence unearthed in the archaeological sites connected with the cultures of the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars, such as the Saltovo-Maiatsk complex in southern Russia and the Tankeev cemetery in the mid-Volga region. While many of the artefacts and especially the dirhams were circulating on these routes as a result, either directly or indirectly, of the intense and voluminous trading activity of the period, they are also relics of long-standing cultural contacts between the peoples participating in this trade. In his review of the archaeological material, Ingmar Jansson highlighted the importance of the eastern contacts during the Viking Age for Scandinavia and especially Sweden. This material, Jansson underlined, emphasised above all the social contacts between Eastern Europe and Scandinavia which resulted from migration of Scandinavians eastwards. Whereas Jansson distinguished between the mercantile and the social, here we have argued that these two aspects of human interaction are closely intertwined. The material evidence we have examined in this chapter seems to further strengthen the importance of this dimension, as well as expanding our view of the cognitive implications of the cultural contacts of the Rus with the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. Furthermore, the objects we have surveyed can be seen to form a special group of source material which conveys a part of the visual cultural currents on the trade routes from the Caspian Sea to the

Baltic. As such it can be interpreted as exerting influence merely by its symbolic imagery wherever they were made or observed.

Secondly, the material evidence diversifies our perception of cultural contacts of the Rus with the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars by testifying to the visual and possibly linguistic impact of oriental ornament, symbols and alphabets. This could feature as an inherent part of the design of an artefact or as an inspiration to a more personalised expression of cultural experiences, as we may interpret here the graffiti on coins. The graffiti, or incisions, in the form of oriental symbols and inscriptions indicate even more clearly that these contacts were not exclusively mercantile in nature. The reproduction of symbols of a spiritual nature that relate to religion, magic and such, seem to convey that the relations were also ideological and thus reflecting various aspects of culture. In this sense the material evidence provides insights into certain aspects of a process of acculturation necessary for the Rus to conduct trade effectively with their reciprocating or host cultures.

Finally, it is clear that the ninth and tenth century Arabic descriptions of the Rus are quite compatible with the surviving material evidence. They underline on numerous occasions the relationship between the Rus and the two main emporia of the period in Khazaria and Bulghar, as well as Rus endeavours in the Caspian region and even inside the Islamic Caliphate. Despite the difficulty in interpreting individual items, symbolic imagery or inscriptions, it seems on the whole plausible to connect the material evidence presented in this chapter with the Muslim writers' descriptions of Rus presence in this region. Importantly, we have established that there is a marked concordance in the chronology of the material finds, especially the dirhams, and the written evidence. Both types of sources coincide in this respect in their narrative of the pattern of Rus presence in the east. This leaves little room for doubt that the first half of the tenth century is by far the most important period in this regard. In the case of the written material, this situation provides further reasons to assume that the significant increase in reports on the Rus among the Muslim writers at this time arises from the former's increased presence and impact in regions and occupations that were of importance to the Islamic world.

Chapter 5

Rus Contacts with the Turkic World

5.0 Introduction

In this final chapter the aim is to make a few observations on the issues of geography and identification of the Rus as it is presented in the sources we have come across thus far. Moreover, we will lay out the evidence at our disposal of contacts between the Rus and the Turkic peoples, and briefly discuss what can be read from them. Additionally, a few suggestions of possible linguistic and literary vestiges of these contacts will be ventured. Our analysis of such contacts with the Turkic world will be concluded by examining the relevant issue of a Rus kaghanate, a much-debated matter in the history of the early Rus.

5.1 Geography and Identity

Reports of Rus appear in vastly separate regions and different contexts during the ninth and tenth centuries, at times even synchronously. We have evidence for Rus presence in Ingelheim on the Rhine in 839 from the *Annales Bertiniani*, and a few years later, according to Ibn Khurradadhbih, there are Rus in Baghdad. Coeval with the increased frequency of reports of Rus in the mid-Volga and the Caspian region in the first half of the tenth century are the Russo-Byzantine treaties of 911 and 945 attesting to the presence of Rus in Kiev. Further examples are the near-contemporary references to Rus raiding in the Caspian Sea, Rus as guards of the Khazar kaghan and Rus trading thrivingly in Bulghar.

It is not obvious how to interpret our accounts of different groups of Rus in vastly different geographical settings and with seemingly different specialisation and objectives. It is also not clear how well this situation compares to the Scandinavian expansion and settlements in Western Europe, where, after intensive contacts with indigenous peoples, cultures of Scandinavian settlers in different regions came to differ significantly in the course of the Viking age.¹

Many questions of difference or sameness may be posed on the Arabic reports of the Rus. A case in point here is the account of the Rus raids on Muslim peoples on the Caspian coastline, which we discussed in chapter two. According to Al-Mas'udi, the Muslims of Khazaria took revenge on the Rus who had decimated other Muslim peoples on the Caspian coast, and the few Rus who escaped their wrath were finished off by the also Muslim Volga Bulgars. Would the more seasoned Rus in the region, those trading with the Volga Bulgars and especially those living in Atil, not have realised the danger involved in attacking Muslims in this place and time? Does this then indicate that the Rus raiders of the Caspian were new to the area and, also, that they had no rapport with those Rus who had already established themselves in the region as traders in Bulghar and guards of the Khazar kaghan? It is also curious if the same group of Rus would be allowed to attack and slaughter Muslims, and at the same time carry out trade with them in Bulghar (where, as we mentioned earlier, Islam was adopted around 900) a little further to the north. Yet, such indicators of disconnectedness dwindle somewhat with the question of how the Rus raiders could have entered into agreement with the Khazars at all if they were newcomers. Furthermore, we do not know how the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars distinguished between different groups of Rus, if indeed they were able to do so. Was there something common to all Rus, and were the Rus themselves aware of how others perceived of this commonality? Our evidence is inconclusive as to the precise differences between the variously located Rus. It is problematic to gauge to what extent the appearance of Rus in distant places at a similar time reflects different groups, or to what extent it

¹ Whether it is historically accurate or not, a similar situation is perhaps reflected in Dudo of St Quentin's account of the treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte in Normandy. It was signed between Charles III and Rollo the Viking chief, where the latter, who had once harried the Franks, now vowed to protect them from further attacks by Northmen and, in turn, received large swathes of land as well as the king's daughter in marriage (Dudo of St Quentin, *History of the Normans*, transl. by E. Christiansen (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), p. 46 seq.).

simply reflects a high level of mobility. Since neither the local Turkic peoples of the period nor the Rus left any written documents of significance, such questions are not easily answered.

From the point of view of the written sources that have survived, the connotations and references (to appearance, language, and customs) that were embedded in this name changed with the passing of time, both as emphases in Muslim geographical writings changed, and also as the socio-political structure and geography of the Rus changed. On the whole, however, it seems that the differences in the portrayal of the early Rus in the Arabic sources and that of other written sources are sufficient to distinguish between Western and Eastern Rus, or Kievan Rus and 'Volga-Caspian' Rus. In other words, between those who are reported in or near the north/south axis between Ladoga and the Black Sea, and those who are reported in the mid- and lower Volga region and the Caspian. This is not to generalise for a strict divide between the two, on the contrary we have to allow for communication and mobility. However, an especially important factor in this distinction, it is argued here, is the evidence of Rus in contact with, and influenced by, the Turkic peoples.

5.2 The Rus and the Turkic Peoples

The evidence indicating contacts between the Rus and the Turkic world can be found in both written and material sources. The former consist of the works of Muslim geographers and historians mainly from the ninth and the tenth century, and the latter of archaeological and numismatic material discovered in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia which we discussed in chapter four. For a better overview of the written sources, however, it may be useful to outline a more specific categorisation in accordance with their content relating to our subject.

The narrative sources may be divided into three categories. First, there are reports of Rus-Turkic relations viewing the subject from afar, or 'telescopically'. These include reports on Rus in the geographical area controlled or populated by

Turkic peoples such as the Volga Bulgars, the Khazars, the Ghuzz and more. The main concern of these reports seems to be the description of various occupations and activities engaged in by the Rus, although they also contain some 'ethnographic' material. Summarising roughly, to this group belong reports on Rus trading with the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars, conducting raids in the Caspian Sea and Rus living in Atil and in the service of the Khazar kaghan.

The second category consists of only one source, the account of Ibn Fadlan, which is at significant variance with the sources in the first group in that the author himself is placed among the Rus. This unique standpoint leads to unique content, and Ibn Fadlan's description is the only elaborate and detailed ethnographic account of the Rus. Importantly, despite this formal distinction of 'telescopic' accounts and up-close observation, Ibn Fadlan provides descriptions that can be seen to corroborate the information contained in sources in the first category. These include some aspects of the Rus funerary ritual that suggest that it may have been influenced by their cultural contacts with the Turkic peoples, as we discussed in chapter three. We may also mention the similarities in Ibn Fadlan's descriptions of the Rus and the Turkic Ghuzz. This particular aspect of Ibn Fadlan's account is doubly important for our case, since the sources in these two categories contain evidence pointing in the same direction, without one being influenced by the other.

The third category are Arabic sources that contain indirect evidence of contact, where the writers seem to perceive of similarities between the Rus and the Turkic peoples. These include various contemporary accounts of the ninth and the tenth century, as well as later notices either referring to the Rus as 'turk', or commemorating their relationship with the Khazars (see chapter two, section 2.6). It will be argued here that these allusions are possibly important evidence in themselves, as we will come to later in our discussion of the Rus Kaganate.

Combined then, the written and material evidence indicates that the Rus had contacts, of varying intensity, with the Turkic peoples for the best part of two centuries. The numismatic evidence showing a trail of early hoards in a north-westward direction from the Caucasus, and possibly the Turkic runes on the

Peterhof coins, indicate that these contacts were under way by the early ninth century. At this point in time Muslim geography and ethnography was still in its infancy, and it is only by the mid-ninth century that our first report of the Rus appears. Then in the first half of the tenth century there is a marked increase in material evidence relatable to the Rus, as well as reports and references to them in the Arabic written sources, both of which gradually fade out after that period.

In the course of the ninth century, a relationship based mainly on trade was forged between the Khazars and the Rus. As we have mentioned before, around or shortly before 900, the importance of the 'Khazarian way' decreased, and the Rus turned their attention to the emporium of the Volga Bulgars until the second half of the tenth century when the trade gradually declines. Despite this the relationship between the Rus and the Khazars seems to have remained strong, as indicated by their ability to enter into agreement that the Rus could conduct raids in the Caspian Sea, and by their service as special guards of the Khazar kaghan. It should be stressed that this relationship is special, not least in the light of reports of how the Khazars treated their more subordinate neighbours, briefly discussed in chapter one.

Thus, in the important first half of the tenth century, the Arabic sources report of Rus interacting simultaneously with two groups of Turkic peoples, the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. Unfortunately we do not know how long an individual or a group would stay in the mid- to lower Volga and the Caspian region, or whether they settled there for generations. Regardless of this, our sources indicate that there would have developed a specific sense of identity among the Rus in this region, one which could have been passed on either through subsequent generations, or to subsequent waves of Rus newcomers; an identity reflecting the adoption of certain cultural elements, certain practical knowledge, at the same time the unavoidable outcome of acculturative processes as well as the acquisition of skills necessary for survival. If the contacts between the Rus and the Turkic peoples had been sporadic or intermittent in the ninth century, they certainly became closer and more intense in the tenth century.

5.3 Vestiges in Scandinavian Language and Literature

As we saw in chapter four, there is a significant number and variety of objects relating to the regions of the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars and also the Islamic world in Scandinavia. Very few reflections of these cultural contacts, however, seem to have found its way into what is preserved of the Old Norse language or literature.² Several reasons for this can be ventured:

After the early eleventh century, both import of dirhams from the Samanids into Eastern Europe and Scandinavia had ceased, and the presence of Rus in the lands of the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars was no more. Thus the link that had existed between these regions at least since the early ninth century was cut. The distances involved, and the presence of other cultures in between such as Slavs,

² This material has been explored at least since Carl Christian Rafn's *Antiquités Russes d'après les monuments historiques des Islandais et des anciens Scandinaves* (Copenhagen: Berling, 1850-1852). Omeljan Pritsak's wrote two enormous books on the subject: *The Origin of Rus': Old Scandinavian sources other than the Sagas* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) and (in Ukrainian): *Pokhobdzhennia Rusi: Starodavni skandinavski sagi i Stara Skandinavia* [The Origin of Rus': Old Scandinavian Sagas and Old Scandinavia] vol. II (Kiev: Oberegi, 2003). Pritsak was fully aware of contacts between Scandinavians and Turkic peoples, and both volumes are full of intriguing and interesting ideas such as hinting at similarities between Old Norse mythology and Turkic religion (vol. 1, pp. 77-86) and the spread of ideas from the region of the Khazars by way of *Óðinn*, interpreted from runic material (*ibid.*, pp. 86-92). Unfortunately the lack of evidence and referencing is dire, especially compared with the amount of generalisations put forth (e.g. the Khazar kaghan, expelled from his land, seeking refuge among the Rus near Rostov (vol. 1, p. 28)) and the text is often unwieldy with lengthy digressions spread over a total of over two thousand pages. A much more critical approach is taken in the works of Tatjana Jackson, who has also examined the Scandinavian literary evidence on early Rus history. No explicit mention of either the Khazars or the Volga Bulgars are seemingly found in these works. Moreover, toponyms in their vicinity such as *Tanais* (or, *Vanakvísl*, the river Don) probably derive from Latin works on geography (T. Jackson, *Islandskie korolovskie sagi o vostochnoi Evrope (s drevneishikh vremen do 1000 g.): Teksty, perevod, kommentarii* [Icelandic Kings' Sagas on Eastern Europe (from the earliest period to 1000): Text, Translation, Commentary] (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), p. 59. The vagueness and mythical aspects of the distant eastern regions in this source material is succinctly laid out in her 'Svíþjóð hin mikla eða kalda (Sweden the Great or Cold)', in *Berkovsbók, Studies in honour of prof. Valery Berkov*, ed. by L. Popova and Y. Kuzmenko (Moscow: Impeto, 1996), pp. 107-14. Mention must also be made of Elena Melnikova's numerous studies on the subject, such as her collection of essays referred to above, *The Eastern World of the Vikings: Eight Essays about Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1996). Recent developments include Haki Antonsson's contribution in which he convincingly demonstrated that the *Saga of Yngvar the Far-traveller*, often thought to contain historical information relating to the Scandinavians' eastern expansion, is in large part an allegory conflating several biblical motifs (forthcoming in 2013).

Finno-Ugric peoples and Balts, may also have played a role in dissipating the Turkic and Islamic elements. Important also is the time that elapsed from the ninth and tenth centuries until the twelfth or thirteenth centuries when such type of writing appeared as would include these matters in Scandinavia and Iceland. Moreover, we should note that the material evidence of contacts with Eastern Europe mainly appears in eastern Sweden, while the Old Norse literature is composed in Western Scandinavia, where these effects would have been felt or remembered to a much lesser extent. One may wonder also, whether it is conceivable that the unpopularity of the Turkic peoples and Muslims in general propagated in conjunction with the crusades from the eleventh century onwards, may have played a part in obliterating a more representative set of Turkic or Altaic elements.³

Notwithstanding this situation, a few items may still be considered in this context. We have already mentioned a group of toponyms from Eastern Europe preserved, however modified, in the Old Norse literature (see chapter one, section 1.4). In addition to these, there may be one or two loanwords from the Turkic languages, which we shall examine in the following.

In the Scandinavian languages and German we find a word which has been used since medieval times to denote a type of measuring device or a weight unit. The spelling varies somewhat from ON *bismari*, Dan. and Nor. *bismer* to Ger. *Besemer* (or *Desem(er)*), and is generally believed to have entered the western and northern European languages from Russian.⁴ Swedish, however, presents a different form *bisman* or *besman*. Etymological dictionaries agree that this term is derived from a Slavic language, more precisely from a Russian form *bezmen*. The *Kluge Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* furthermore gives the thirteenth century as a rough dating of its introduction into German and mentions that the word is probably ultimately derived from Turkish *batman*, a weight denomination

³ For instance, S. Lloyd, 'The Crusading Movement, 1096–1274', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 34–65: "...as total ideological war, the crusades dramatically increased the xenophobic streak within western culture, hitherto relatively dormant, and heightened the exclusive world view in which Latin Christian cultural superiority was taken for granted." (p. 64).

⁴ *Kluge Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, p. 78.

of approximately ten kilograms.⁵ In his etymological study, Martti Räsänen gives *büzmän* which appears in Kimek, Balkar and Karachay Turkic, and the Kazan-Tatar form *büzmän* all with the same or similar meaning. Räsänen further traces the various Turkic forms to a Persian plural *vazn-an* (weights), ultimately deriving from the Arabic *vazn* (pl. *avzan*) meaning ‘weight’ or ‘measure.’⁶ There may be, however, another etymology to consider for this word, as well as the possible chronology of its introduction in the old eastern Scandinavian language.

The first attestation of the word in a Slavic language comes from a Novgorodian birch bark letter (no. 439), which dates from around 1200, as *bezmen* and the remains of a wooden *bezmen* were indeed also found in Novgorod in a layer datable to the thirteenth century.⁷ However, in the modern Chuvash language, now spoken in the republic of Chuvashia on the upper Volga and generally considered to be the descendant of the language of the Volga Bulgars, *vis’-* is a root with the meaning ‘to measure’. Although we lack sufficient data on the Volga Bulgar language, it is possible that a participial form or an infinitive becoming a *nomen concretum* of this root may have been *vis’-men* or the like, therewith rendering the name of the device used for measuring. If this was the case, it may point to another candidate for the Swedish form in addition to the Slavonic one.⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ M. Räsänen, *Versuch eines Etymologischen Wörterbuchs der Türkischen Sprachen* (Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura, 1969), p. 73. The word does not appear, however, in the list of old- or proto-Bulgarian words provided in the register (*Versuch eines Etymologischen Wörterbuchs der Türkischen Sprachen*, vol. 2, *Wortregister*, ed. by István Kecskeméti (Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura, 1971), p. 19).

⁷ A. A. Zalizniak, *Drevnovožgorodskii dialekt* [The Early Novgorodian Dialect] (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), p. 436.

⁸ The Hungarian Turkologist Klára Agyagási explains, however, that the Chuvash verb *vis’-* has a palatal sybillant *s’* in the root and its initial ‘v’ has a prothetic origin in front of a labial ‘ö’, which emerged not earlier than the tenth century. This means that the Old Chuvash form of the verb was *öľč-* and can hardly be the source for *bezmen* because of the phonetic difficulties. Another problem she points out is that in Chuvash and in its dialects and written monuments from the eighteenth century there does not exist a ‘vis’men’ form for ‘balance’. Theoretically, nevertheless, the word ‘pismen’ (from *bezmen*) can have a phonetic alternation to *vismen* in the Chuvash diaspora near Kuybishev, where a *p/v* phonetic alternation has developed although this form has not been attested (K. Agyagási, *Rannie russkie zaïmstvovaniia tjurkskikh jazikov Volgo-Kamskogo areala I* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2005), pp. 69–70. Many thanks to Dr Agyagási for forwarding this information).

The second loanword in question comes from the saga of *Arrow-Oddi*, ultimately traced to the thirteenth century as a work of an Icelandic anonymous author.⁹ In addition to several Eastern European toponyms (e.g. *Kænugarður* = Kiev, *Ráðstofa* = Rostov, *Súrdalir* = Suzdal', *Móramar* = Murom), an important element in the story are Oddr's magical arrows, called *gusisnautar*, given to him by the giant *Gusir*:

Grímur accompanies them to their ships, and on departing says to Oddur: I want to give you these, my kinsmen, three arrows called *Gusisnautar*, which I won them from Gusi king of the Finns. They will fly back onto the bowstring on their own accord, and will never miss their mark' [transl. – T. J. H.].¹⁰

The name, and variants of it, appears in several other earlier and later works, and is generally interpreted as the name of a Giant, without any further analysis.¹¹ The appearance, however, in the same context of this name and arrows evokes the name of the Ghuzz, which we have already mentioned on several occasions in this dissertation, especially in reference to the account of Ibn Fadlan and our discussion of certain textual similarities in his description of the Rus and the Ghuzz (see chapter three). Such a connection may at first seem fanciful, yet there are several factors that may be considered in this regard.

The Ghuzz, as many other Turkic nomadic peoples, were extremely skilled archers often noted for their talent. Also, importantly, they formed a significant contingent of what were to become the Seljuq Turks who conquered Anatolia and established the Ottoman Empire in the eleventh century. Besides the numerous, especially Islamic, sources that document them, their name is found as a loanword in several languages and provides an interesting testimony of their reputation. In Pontic Greek, for instance, the verb (*o*)*gouzevo*, derived from Ghuzz (Gr. *Oghuz*), and its derivative adjectival forms, means 'to behave in a coarse

⁹ *Arrow–Odd: A Medieval Novel*, transl. with introd. by P. Edwards and H. Pálsson (New York & London: University of London Press, 1970), p. xxi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21. “Nú fylgir Grímur þeim til skipa, og að skilnaði mælti hann við Odd: Gripir eru hér, frændi, segir hann, er eg vil þér gefa; Það eru örvar þrjár, en þær eigu nafn og heita Gusisnautar; þær vann eg af Gusi Finnakonungi, en þær munu sjálfar fljúga aftur á streng, og allt munu þær hitta það er þeim er að skotið” (*Örvar-Odds Saga*, ed. by Þorsteinn frá Hamri (Reykjavík: Bjallan, 1977), p. 24).

¹¹ R. Šimek, *Hugtök og Heiti í Norrænni Godafræði* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1993), p. 101 ('Gusir').

manner', 'to act like a Turk' and 'coarse, barbaric, rude, cruel' respectively.¹² In the following centuries the Ghuzz spread over a wide area, from Afghanistan to the Iberian peninsula.¹³ In the mid-twelfth century they appear in the Almohad army in north Africa and became a *corps d'élite* armed with their weapon of choice, the composite bow (named after them, *ghuzz*) and were a greatly feared unit until the appearance of portable fire-arms.¹⁴ Their role and reputation in the Iberian peninsula is further reflected in the various connotations their name obtained. Besides its initial reference to their proficiency with the bow, *algoz* as it is attested in Andalusi Arabic, came to signify 'executioner', and possibly 'torturer', along with connotations of general barbarousness and cruelty we already came across in Pontic Greek.¹⁵ In short, their fame, or rather, infamy, spread far and wide throughout Europe and the Middle East, and their name, associated with archery and fierceness, was recorded by many of the medieval European historians.¹⁶ That the story, as proposed by Adolf Stender-Petersen, probably contains a Byzantine element in the motif of the hero's death on account of his horse is a further indication that the underlying form for the *gusisnantar* may in fact derive from the east, via Rus contacts with the Ghuzz and other Turkic peoples.¹⁷

Finally, a mention will be made of a particular element in descriptions of the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars already alluded to in chapter three (see chapter three, p. 116, fn. 73) where we postulated that the motif may have been carried from the Volga Bulgars to Scandinavia, similarly to elements in the story of *Arrow-Odd* which were apparently transmitted to Scandinavia from Byzantium according to A. Stender-Petersen), which is the act of strangulation or hanging in relation to knowledge or wisdom. It should not surprise us that such a similar element is found among these two kindred, neighbouring peoples, with a partially shared history going back to the seventh century. That there is a similarity

¹² A. G. C. Savvides, 'Byzantines and the Oghuz: Some Observations on the Nomenclature', *Byzantinobulgaria*, no. 54 (1993), 147–55 (p. 147).

¹³ See C. Cahen, 'Ghuzz', *EI2*, pp. 1106–10.

¹⁴ The Ghuzz in the North African armies and also in Spain seem to have maintained their separate identity for a while, e.g. having their own cemetery (G. Deverdun, 'Ghuzz – ii – Muslim West', *EI2*, p. 1110).

¹⁵ F. Mañlo Salgado, 'El Arabismo Algoz (<al-guzz). Contenido y uso', *Historia. Instituciones. Documentos*, no. 26 (1999), 319–28. The name has survived to this day in Portuguese with the meaning 'executioner', or by extension 'a cruel person' (*ibid.*).

¹⁶ G. Deverdun, 'Ghuzz – ii – Muslim West', *EI2*, p. 1110.

¹⁷ A. Stender-Petersen, 'The Byzantine Prototype of the Varangian Story of the Hero's Death through his Horse', in *Varangica* (Aarhus: Bianco Luno, 1953), pp. 181–88.

between this element and Snorri Sturluson's depiction of Odin in *Hávamál*, however, is more remarkable and such parallels elsewhere seem to be non-existent.

None of the examples aired here are without problems, and it is somewhat outside the expressed aim of this dissertation to pursue the matter here. However, similarly to our interpretation of Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus, they stand as reminders that parallels may be searched for in more places in studies on foreign influences on Scandinavian peoples in general, and their cultural contacts in the eastern lands in particular, especially in the poorly documented period in question here. More research is desirable on not only all the Scandinavian written sources, but also the archaeological and numismatic evidence, in search of further parallels which may hitherto have eluded us.

5.4 The Issue of a Rus Kaghanate

Alongside the debate on the nature of the establishment of the Kievan Rus state, one of the important historical questions scholars have dealt with in relation with the early history of the Rus is the idea that they established a kaghanate.¹⁸ This matter is important here, because it is a type of polity known to have existed among the Turkic peoples for centuries, both before and after the period of the Rus' contacts with them in the ninth and the tenth centuries. This hypothesis arises due to several sources referring to the chief of the Rus with the title of *kaghan*. In a passage in the *Annales Bertiniani* s.a. 839, the king of the Rhos is called *chacanus* in Latin.¹⁹ In this context we may also consider a letter from 871 preserved in the *Chronicon Salernitanum*, a reply from Louis II to a letter from the Byzantine Emperor Basil I. Here, it is refuted that the princely title of either the *Nortmanni* or the Khazars is kaghan, and that it belongs to the Avars.²⁰ Basil's

¹⁸ A kaghanate was a polity typical of many of the Mongolic and Turkic peoples before and during the medieval period, ruled by a kaghan (variously spelled also as 'khan', 'khaqan', 'kagan').

¹⁹ J. L. Nelson, *The Annals of St-Bertin*, p. 134.

²⁰ "Chaganum vero nos praelatum Avarum, non Gazanorum aut Nortmannorum nuncupari reperimus..." (*Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, vol. 5, ed. by E. Gaspar et al., Monumenta Germaniae Historica, vol. 7 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1928), p. 388.

original letter is lost, but Louis' reply indicates that it contained a reference to a kaghan of the Northmen.

Regarding the Islamic sources, in the early tenth century Ibn Rustah claims that "They [the Rus] have a king called kaghan Rus". The notices from the anonymous *Hudud al-Alam* in 982, "Their king is called Rus kaghan", the mention of a Rus kaghan by Gardizi in the mid-eleventh century and of the anonymous *Mujmal at-tawarikh* composed in 1126 apparently derive from Ibn Rustah, and possibly ultimately from Jayhani (see discussion in chapter two, section 2.4.1).²¹ Finally, this term is attested in three different places in the Old Slavonic written material. First, the *Slovo o zakone i blagodati* (the Sermon on Law and Grace) of Metropolitan Ilarion of Kiev dated to the 1040s refers to both the Kievan princes Vladimir (three times) and Iaroslav (twice) by this name.²² Secondly, the *Slovo o polku Igoreve* mentions the kaghans Sviatoslav, Iaroslav and Oleg.²³ Finally, a graffito dated to the eleventh century was found on the interior wall of the Cathedral of St Sophia in Kiev, reading "Spasi, Gospodi, kagana nashego" (O Lord, save our kaghan!).²⁴ That these mentions of a kaghan are scattered over several centuries implies that they cannot all be references to a proper kaghanate of the Rus. If such a polity had existed for two or three centuries, we would have known of it through other sources, for example from Byzantine writers.

Various explanations of the attribution of this title to the Rus have been offered, from being a 'borrowed' term from the Khazars, to being a usurpation of the title, a declaration of independence.²⁵ Peter Golden convincingly confronted such hypotheses, especially their shortcomings in the correct understanding of the

²¹ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, p. 145; *Hudud al-Alam*, p. 159; I. Zimonyi and H. Göckenjan, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*, p. 180 (for Gardizi's notice).

²² *Sermons and Rhetoric of Kievan Rus*, transl. and with an introduction by S. Franklin, Harvard Library of Early Ukrainian Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 17, 18 and 26.

²³ The dating and authorship of this text is debated. See E. L. Keenan, *Josef Dobrovský and the Origins of the Igor' Tale* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2003).

²⁴ S. A. Vysotskiy, 'Drevnerusskie graffiti Sofii Kievskoi?', *Numizmatika i Epigrafika*, no. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 1960), pp. 157–58.

²⁵ See A. P. Novoseltsev, 'Vostochnye istochniki o vostochnykh slavianakh i Rusi VI–IX vv. in *Drevnerusskoe gosudarstvo i ego mezhdunarodnoe znachenie*, ed. by A. P. Novoseltsev et al. (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), p. 372 seq; G. Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 195.

term and the contexts in which it could appear.²⁶ For the location of a Rus kaghanate, several suggestions have likewise been made and potential sites range from Riurikovo Gorodishche near Lake Ladoga in the north, to the Taman peninsula between the Azov Sea and the Black Sea in the south. Boris Naimushin even introduced the notion of a floating, mobile kaghanate in line with his interpretation of the Rus as ‘nomads of the rivers’.²⁷

Compared to other aspects of the culture of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of Eurasia, the office and role of the kaghan is relatively well known from both contemporary observations, especially the Islamic sources, as well as comparative material derived from various periods and regions. Although the origins of the title are obscure, it was known already by the Hsien-Pi and the Juan-Juan in China and outer Mongolia in the early centuries of the first millennium. The title is attributed in the eighth century Orkhon inscription to several rulers in Central and Eastern Eurasia, and in the following centuries it is also mentioned by Chinese writers.²⁸

The kaghan was regarded as a holy figure, and was viewed as a symbolic good luck charm for the welfare of the state, endowed with *qut*, or heavenly fortune. His office had several ceremonial aspects, and the kaghan could even be sacrificed himself in difficult times according to Al-Mas‘udi.²⁹ Although such features had formed a part of the kaghan’s office in other periods and places, a specific development apparently took place among the Khazars, where he became increasingly sacralised and tabooised, perhaps reflecting his importance and renown. An anecdote from the twelfth century, reflecting an older pre-Islamic tradition, tells of the Sassanid Shah Khusraw Anushirvan (Chosroes, 531-578) who kept golden thrones on either side of his own throne reserved for the kings

²⁶ P. B. Golden, ‘The Question of the Rus Qaganate’, p. 83.

²⁷ B. Naimushin, ‘Khazarskii kaganat i Vostochnaia Evropa: Stolknovenia mezhdru “kochevnikami stepei” i “kochevnikami rek” [The Khazar Kaghanate and Eastern Europe: Collision between the “Nomads of the Steppe” and the “Nomads of the Rivers”], in *Balgari i Xazari: Prez Rannoto Srednovekovie*, ed. by Tsvetelin Stepanov (Sofia: TANGRA, 2003), pp. 142–58.

²⁸ See overview in P. B. Golden, ‘The Question of the Rus Qaganate’, pp. 83–84.

²⁹ For instance by strangulation with a silk cord. Al-Mas‘udi, *Muruj adb-dhabab*, vol. I, p. 181 See also recently P. B. Golden, ‘Irano-Turcica: The Khazar Sacral Kingship Revisited’, *Acta Orientalia*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2007), 161–94.

of China, Byzantium and the Khazars, illustrating the elevated status and recognition the latter had gained throughout the civilised world.³⁰

Importantly, as Golden points out, a claim to the kaghanal title required a descent from or intimate connection with the ruling clan of the Ashina or some other recognised charismatic clan, a criteria only fulfilled in Eastern Europe by the Avars, Khazars and Bulgars.³¹ Thus, the Rus would not have been able to borrow this title any more they could have borrowed the Greek *basileus* or the Arabic *khalifa* and it is furthermore highly unlikely that a foreign chief, from the perspective of the Khazar ruling house, could have enjoyed a similar sacralisation as the figure of the Khazar kaghan had become. Usurpation of the title, on the other hand, could only have been legitimised with the complete destruction of the kaghanal clan from which it was taken, and we know this was not the case. Golden's proposal, instead, was that the Rus kaghanate came into being as a vassal kaghanate of the Khazars, possibly strengthened by intermarriage between the two.³² It remains, however, that the Khazars had many peoples under their command on whom this title was not conferred. The 'exception' in the case of the Rus, suggests Golden, arises from either a dynastic connection, or their specific strategic and military value to the Khazars at the time, or perhaps both.³³

A second case in point of this interpretation arises from similarities in Ibn Fadlan's description of the king of the Rus and the Khazar kaghan. According to our source the Rus king has

four hundred <men> sit below his couch, which is huge and is studded with precious stones. On his couch there sit forty jariyahs [servant/slave girls – T. J. H.] who belong to him [Yaqut: his bed]. Sometimes he has coitus with one of them in the presence of those comrades [ashab] whom we have mentioned. He does not come down from his throne. When he wants to satisfy an urge, [Yaqut: he satisfies] it in a salver. When he wants to ride, he has his horse brought up to the throne, [Yaqut: whence he mounts it] and when

³⁰ Ibn al-Balkhi, *Farsnama*, ed. and transl. by G. Le Strange and R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1962), p. 97; A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1944), pp. 411–12).

³¹ P. B. Golden, 'The Question of the Rus Qaganate', p. 86. Golden emphasises that the notions of legitimacy and *translatio imperii* were of great importance and comparable to ideas in the successor states of the Roman Empire.

³² P. B. Golden, 'The Question of the Rus Qaganate', p. 85 seq., with discussion of historical precedents. Also *idem*, 'Rus', *EI2*, p. 621.

³³ P. B. Golden, 'The Question of the Rus Qaganate', p. 88.

[Yaqut: he wants] to dismount, he brings his horse <up to the throne> so that he can dismount there. He has a vice-gerent [khalifah] who leads the armies, [Yaqut: fights against the enemy and stands in for him] among his subjects³⁴

In Golden's opinion, again, it is "clearly a description of a sacral king, in many respects similar to that of the Khazar Kaghanate (except for the sexual licentiousness), with its holy Kaghan and the *Shad/beg/yilig* who ran the actual affairs of the government", comparable to the vice-gerent of the king of the Rus.³⁵ Golden argues that if the notice is not a contamination from the immediately following notice on the Khazar kaghan, it may be significant evidence in support of the thesis of the Khazar origins of the Rus Kaghanate.³⁶ The question remains, however, why would Ibn Fadlan, perfectly aware of the appropriate Turkic terminology (*kaghan*, *beg*, *yilig*), choose other terms for the Rus (*malik*, *khalifa*) ruler if he was in fact a kaghan?

Furthermore, any discussion of a Rus kaghanate is seriously constrained by two factors. The first is that the majority of the extant contemporary written accounts of the peoples of the northern lands, both Byzantine and Muslim, are completely silent in this regard. Furthermore, the sources introduced above referring to a *kaghan*, do not mention at any point a *kaghanate*, and therefore no original conception of chronology, size or the geography of such an entity has come down to us. Earlier, we already addressed the limitations of Ibn Rustah's description, which is sometimes taken to be a description of a Rus kaghanate located on the lake Ladoga although this notion is problematic in several aspects (chapter one, pp. 15-16). The usage of the term in the considerably later Slavonic material is susceptible to particular literary usages and a different context altogether, where it's meaning is not fully clear.³⁷

It is especially noteworthy that none of our most important writers on the Rus refer to the chief of the Rus as a *kaghan*. Ibn Fadlan, up-close and presumably having access to first hand information on such matters, calls him *malik*, 'king'. It

³⁴ *Risalah*, p. 165, *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

³⁵ P. B. Golden, 'Rus', *EI2*, pp. 622–23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 623.

³⁷ P. B. Golden, 'The Question of the Rus Qaghanate', p. 97.

may be, that Ibn Fadlan was not very interested in *their* categories, as we have already mentioned regarding the absence of anything specific indicating their provenance, such as loanwords or a passage on their origins or homeland. Such a stance may be one reason why he did not render the title of kaghan, if in fact that was the title of the Rus leader at the time. On the other hand, given the importance of the title, and the fact that it would have been known to some extent among Muslim geographers and historians at the time - and most certainly to embassies such as the one of which Ibn Fadlan was a part - especially with reference to the Khazar kaghan, it is also reasonable to expect that Ibn Fadlan would have made notice of it as the title of the leader of the Rus, as he indeed does in his account of the Khazars.³⁸

All the more striking perhaps is the omission of this term in Ibn Khurradadhbih's work. Being the head of the postal and intelligence operations of the Caliphate in the mid-ninth century, writing only a few years after the mention of the Rus kaghan in the *Annales Bertiniani*, we should certainly expect him to have recorded it, not least given his specific effort to recount the rulers of various regions and their titles, among them the Khazar kaghan and the *kniaz* of the Saqalibah.³⁹ Al-Mas'udi's numerous reports on the Rus likewise make no mention of this title.

One option to consider is that the chief of the Rus did not bear this title at all, and that such references in other Muslim works of the period are rather to be explained on account of a perhaps semi-legendary development of the reputation of the Rus. This may have included activities and agendas, which the writers of the period may have perceived of as similar to that of Turkic, sometimes nomadic, peoples as well as on account of their alliance with Turkic peoples such as the Khazar, the Volga Bulgars, or the Ghuzz. In our discussion of Ibn Fadlan's account previously, we highlighted both certain customs that may have been influenced by the Rus relationship with the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars, as well as some textual similarities in the description between the Turkic Ghuzz and the Rus, perhaps implying that the author perceived of them as somehow

³⁸ *Risalah*, p. 169: "...malik al-Khazar, wa ismu-hu khaqan..." (the King of the Khazars, who is called kaghan).

³⁹ Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik*, p. 15. The king of the *Saqalibah* is called *q.n.a.z.*, probably a transcription of a Slavic word kniaz, knaz or similar, deriving from Germanic *cuninga* (see *ibid.*, p. 13, fn. 3 in de Goeje's French translation).

similar groups. To this we may also add similarities in this description of their ruler as a sacral figure, despite not being, in Ibn Fadlan's mind, a regular *kaghan*.

Of possible relevance in this context, are the several later notices on the Rus we mentioned in chapter two associating them with, or counting them among, the Turkic peoples. These include the anonymous *Mujmal al-Tavarikh*, referring to the Khazars and the Rus as brothers,⁴⁰ Al-Idrisi writing in the twelfth century, claiming that Kiev (*Kuyyabal*) is the city of the Turk called Rus⁴¹ and in the following century Al-Qazwini similarly writes that the Rus are a large grouping of the Turk.⁴² Ibn Khaldun mentions the Rus along with the Bulghars and several other peoples, concluding that they are all Turk tribes,⁴³ and in a somewhat garbled notice on the Rus military activities in the Caucasus dated to 943 he describes them as Christian Turks.⁴⁴ Finally we have Ibn Iyas' writings from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, apparently amalgamating several accounts and stating that the Rus are a great people of the Turk.⁴⁵ In this context we may also consider again the textual correspondences in Ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus and the Ghuzz.

A similar, yet implicit, linkage may possibly be read from Al-Mas'udi's account of the Rus raids in the Caspian Sea. In some aspects it is problematic that this was carried out with the consent of the Khazars who would in turn receive half the booty. We know from Ibn Fadlan that the kaghan was well aware of the significant Muslim presence in his lands and neighbouring regions, as well as their response to aggression.⁴⁶ Leaving then aside the veracity of Al-Mas'udi's report

⁴⁰ *Mujmal al-Tavarikh*, ed. by M. T. Bahar (Tehran: Khavar, 1939).

⁴¹ From the *Kitab Rajar* (Book of Roger). P. A. Jaubert, *Géographie d'Édrisi*, 2 vols. (Paris: Société de Géographie, 1836–40), vol. 2, p. 401.

⁴² F. Wüstenfeld, *Zakariya Ben Muhammad Ben Mahmud el-Cazwini Kosmographie* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1849), pp. 393–94.

⁴³ From J. Seippel, *Rerum Normannicarum Fontes Arabici*, p. 109.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁶ The King of the Khazar has a mighty city by the River Atil: it is <on> both banks. On one of the banks are the Muslims, on the other are the King and his comrades. In charge of the Muslims is one of the King's ghulams called Kh.z. He is a Muslim. The legal rulings of the Muslims, <both> those who reside in the territory of the Khazar and those who go there regularly on trading missions are referred to this Muslim ghulam — no one else looks into their affairs or decides between them. [S. Dahhan's edition ends here. Yaqut continues (Wustenfeld ed.)] In this city, the Muslims have a congregational mosque, where they perform the prayer and gather on the days of congregation. It has a lofty minaret and a number of muezzins. When in the year 310[922–3], the King of the Khazar was apprised that the Muslims had razed the synagogue which was in

of a Rus-Khazar contract, their alleged pact according to the notice may have been fashioned in order to underline the special relationship between the two.

We may also consider here Ibn Fadlan's arrangement of the passages on the Rus and the Khazars next to each other. Perhaps he perceived of them as similar, in a like manner as Ibn Khurradadhbih perceived of the Radhaniyya and the Rus as similar (chapter two, section 2.3). Finally, we may note that this part of Ibn Fadlan's description is presumably not the result of his own observation and may be a distorted or embellished account of an informant, perhaps in keeping with the Rus earlier attempts at misleading Ibn Fadlan discussed in chapter three, if this was the case.

Yet another interpretation may be that the leader of one group of Rus was called kaghan while other Rus leaders were not. Regarding the report in *Annales Bertiniani* (s.a. 839), it may be explained as the Rus themselves would have seen the advantage in employing this title, perhaps opportunistically connecting themselves with the Khazars, who, as everyone knew, were very powerful at the time. Examples of 'fictitious kinship' are known from the anthropological literature, and it is in part conveyed by symbolic imagery, perhaps corresponding to some of the material evidence we discussed in chapter four.⁴⁷

The vinculation of the Rus with this name may also have changed over centuries. In the *Annales Bertiniani* it may mean that the Rus carried out their trade under the auspices of the Khazar kaghan. At this time the trade indeed crossed the latter's territory, and it would have been unthinkable for the Rus to operate there without the consent of the kaghanal house. Perhaps the later occurrences of this name in Arabic texts are merely distant echoes of this situation, along with the perception among the Muslim writers that something was alike between the Rus and the Turkic peoples.

Dar al-Babunij, he gave the order and the minaret was razed and the muezzins killed, saying, "If it were not for my fear that there would not remain in the lands of Islam any synagogue which would not have been razed, then I would have razed the mosque!" (*Risalah*, p. 172; Yaqut, *Mu'jam al buldan*, ed. by F. Wustenfeld (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866–73), vol 2, pp. 439–40; *The Epistle of Ibn Fadlan* (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ P. D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, p. 46.

Likewise, we should not assume the exact same usage of the term in Ilarion's work and the graffito in St Sophia in Kiev. These two instantiations perhaps give us a glimpse of a less anti-Khazar sentiment among the Kievans than that which we can derive from the *Primary Chronicle*, or simply that his name evoked memories or sentiments of power, although the Khazars had ceased to exist as a readily definable state at this time, according to our sources. It is possible, for instance, that Kievan princes took up a Khazarian trident as their emblem, a symbol which was originally a tamgha.⁴⁸ The name could have been similarly a selected token of power, implemented in the shaping of the emerging Kievan Rus identity. We should not expect a newly Christianised Kievan Rus, probably with a more significant admixture of Scandinavians than in the twelfth century, to have looked as ideologically homogenous as it is portrayed by the compiler of the *Primary Chronicle*.

On the whole, the existing evidence is not particularly conducive to a 'solution' of the problem of the Rus Kaghanate, and without further material coming to light, Peter Golden's elaborate analysis is perhaps as far as can be reached at the moment, with the addition of our discussion of the perception of the Muslim writers of the special relationship between the Rus and the Khazars. The hypothesis that the Rus kaghanate existed as a very short-lived political entity at some point in the mid-ninth century may be correct. However, it is possible that the notion of a Rus kaghan arose from other indices of Rus-Khazar close relations or similarities which we have mentioned here, and that these similarities prompted this association in the minds of the Muslim authors more so than did a possible, but at any rate ephemeral, nomination of a Rus leader as kaghan.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have recapitulated and summarised the evidence offered by our sources on the contacts between the Rus and the Turkic peoples, and some

⁴⁸ S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, pp. 120–21 and fn. 21. Tamghas are marks of proprietorship, brand, stamp, landmark, signature, and such, either referring to an individual or a clan (cf. *Practical Dictionary of Siberia and the North*, p. 905).

specific issues related to these contacts were also discussed. On the whole our source material is too poor to elucidate the precise nature of relationship between the various groups of Rus reported in the vast expanses of Eastern Europe, and on one occasion in the Middle East. However, there is a clear tendency on behalf of the Arabic geographers and historians to connect the Rus with the Turkic peoples of the mid- to lower Volga and the Caspian Sea region. This particular feature is a distinguishing aspect of the Arabic sources, setting them apart from Byzantine, Slavonic, and Latin written evidence on the early Rus overviewed in chapter one. What this difference points to is a high probability that there were two distinct, eastern and western, groups of Rus, or the 'Volga-Caspian' Rus as opposed to the Kievan Rus. As stated above, however, such a differentiation is not proposed as a rigid classification of two entirely separated groups, since the mobility of the early Rus is an important factor that makes any clear-cut division problematic.

We have also briefly discussed possible vestiges of the cultural contacts between the Rus and the Turkic world in Scandinavian language and literature. Two possible loanwords were discussed in some detail, although the evidence supporting our theory is admittedly problematic.

Finally, in our discussion of the question of a Rus kaghanate, we have presented the main evidence for this issue and have reviewed the main theories put forth on the nature and chronology of this hypothetical polity. In addition to some established ideas, especially those of Golden, we have suggested that the *idea* of a Rus kaghan or kaghanate may also have emerged among the Muslim geographers and historians due to the perceived close relationship between the Rus and the Khazars, and also perhaps due to some cultural characteristics these 'eastern' Rus shared with them and other Turkic peoples.

Conclusion

This dissertation has presented an argument suggesting that scholarship on the early history of the Rus has hitherto not taken full account of the contribution of Arabic literature to the subject. Meanwhile, this evidence is of utmost importance as the most diverse and voluminous contemporary body of source material on the Rus in the ninth and the tenth centuries. Moreover, the preceding analysis points to some significant differences between the Arabic narrative sources and other textual sources as they relate to descriptions of the geography, social structure and cultural milieu of the early Rus.

As a consequence of the lack of in-depth research on this evidence to elucidate early Rus history, little discussion has taken place on one of its most salient features which is the relationship that the Arabic writers frequently report between the Rus and the Turkic peoples in the mid- to lower Volga and Caspian Sea region, especially the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. As pointed out earlier, in addition to scholarly inertia, specific political circumstances in the USSR placed pressure on Soviet scholars to write the Turkic peoples out of a localised history context which was seen to have been dominated by the eastern Slavs and the medieval Russians in particular.

In contrast to this established academic discourse, especially powerful in modern Russia but also traceable in some academic works written in Scandinavia, the aim of this dissertation has been to study the perception and representation of Arabic geographers and historians of the early Rus, especially with regard to their contacts with the Turkic peoples in Eastern Europe and the effect such interactions may have had on early Rus identity. Secondly, this dissertation has aimed to examine archaeological and numismatic material that could be of relevance to the descriptions of the Rus in the Arabic narrative sources.

Chapter one has discussed evidence and theories relating to the origins or cultural affiliation of the Rus, and has suggested that they are most strongly linked with Scandinavia and the Scandinavian expansion that was in full force in this period. Hence, 'Rus', and variants thereof, was the name given to groups venturing eastwards in the ninth and tenth centuries, among which the Scandinavian element seems to have been predominant. Although the Rus are, in the Arabic texts, portrayed in various contexts, they are primarily reported as traders.

In order to further throw light on the broader implications of trading relationships such as the Rus engaged in, theories and models from sociology and anthropology were introduced. It is clear in the anthropological literature that trade is an important stimulus for reciprocity and exchange not only of material goods, but also of ideas and customs, and can as such be dealt with as a sphere of cultural contacts. Thus, as a consequence of their trading activities, the Rus underwent various processes of acculturation, which were discussed in detail with reference to the acculturation model of Berry and Sam. We furthermore connected these approaches with a specific definition of identity that is suitable to our description of the Rus, not least with regard to their mobility. Taken together, these theories provide us with a possible conceptual approach to discuss the Rus in the Arabic sources.

Chapter two has surveyed the source material especially with a view to the Muslim writers' perception of the location of the Rus and the cultural context in which they appear. An attempt was also made to identify the earliest Arabic report on the Rus, as well as to address the question of why and how the Rus caught, and retained for some time, the interest of the Muslim writers. This issue is also addressed from different standpoints in chapters four and five.

Our analysis of the earliest potential reference to the Rus in the *Surat al-Ard* of Al-Khwarizmi, dated to the 820s or 830s, has shown that it is in fact not a reference to the Rus, but rather a geographical feature with a similar name. On closer examination of the manuscript the word that had hitherto been read as 'Rus' in fact contains an initial *alif*. This means that the earliest mention of the Rus in the

Arabic sources belongs to the *Kitab al-masalik wa 'l-mamalik* of Ibn Khurradadhbih, written most probably in the mid-840s. Chapter two has also addressed the problematic notice of Ibn Rustah, which has sometimes been interpreted as a description of Riurikovo Gorodishche or some other important settlement in northern Rus. Our textual analysis has suggested instead that this reading of Ibn Rustah's passage is indeed problematic on several grounds (the presence of a topos, lack of specific geographical location), and that it is unlikely that this author had any clear notion of such northerly regions as Lake Ladoga and its environs.

Most importantly, chapter two has identified a significant corpus of texts describing, commenting on, or commemorating the relationship between the Rus and the Turkic peoples. Moreover, on those occasions when the Arabic writers assign a geographical location for the Rus, they are usually placed in the region between the Caucasus and Bulghar on the Volga, and the Azov Sea and the Caspian Sea. The city of Kiev only seems to enter the Arabic sources in the writings of Al-Istakhri in the mid-tenth century, although it may have belonged to the lost work of Al-Balkhi written shortly after 930. Of some interest are also a few later geographical works in which the Rus were counted among the Turkic peoples, or where their special relationship with the Khazars was recalled.

Two works stand out regarding their importance for the history of the early Rus. These are the *Muruj al-dhahab* written by the great historian Al-Mas'udi towards the mid-tenth century, and the account of Ibn Fadlan from the early 920s. These works also contain the most significant evidence of the relationship between the Rus and the Turkic peoples.

Chapter three examines in detail the aspects of Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus that were relevant to our study. Hence, our main focus has rested on the elaborate description of their funerary ceremony, which the writer apparently witnessed in person. This passage has been examined by a number of scholars, not least from the point of view of Viking Age studies and Old Norse mythology, and it has generally been considered as a description of a Scandinavian or, more specifically, Odinic ritual. On closer scrutiny of Ibn Fadlan's account, however, it

seems that this contention is problematic. Indeed, numerous elements of the ceremony cannot be related unambiguously with medieval Scandinavian rituals or beliefs, and moreover there are other elements which bear resemblance to Turkic and Altaic funerary practices. Further analysis of the text also revealed textual similarities in Ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus and the Turkic Ghuzz, a possible indicator of certain customs they had in common, or of the writer's perception of them as constituting a similar group of people. Thus, although correspondences and parallels exist between Ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus funeral and what we know of such practices among the cultures with which it may be related, it is problematic to reach any firm solutions in this regard. Notwithstanding, it is clear that Old Norse sources are by no means the only material to consider in search of such parallels. To conclude, we suggested that the ritual was probably above all a product of the cultural, and geographically specific, milieu in which it took place.

As to the social function of the ceremony, it might be seen, aside from its specific religious or theological nature, as a means of maintaining and redefining Rus identity in response to their roles. These roles would have been different from time to time depending on shifting balances in power and trade and hence the ritual may not have existed in the form documented by Ibn Fadlan for very long. Furthermore, for the Rus as a social group, the ritual may also have served to reinforce and redefine status and social roles within Rus society, where the ordeal of the slave-girl is a symbolic representation of the immense inequality between the powerful slave masters and the powerless slaves.

In sum, Ibn Fadlan's account is a unique text for its period. The ethnographic description of the Rus contains a myriad of details inviting many different approaches and interpretations. What is imperative, however, is to approach the text in its proper context: that is, as a description made by an Arab, in the Arabic language, of a people subsisting on the banks of the mid-Volga region in the first half of the tenth century. Examining it merely as a means of corroborating or supplementing our knowledge of Old Norse mythology and beliefs, without consideration to the circumstances of its composition, greatly reduces the complexity, and the remarkable richness, of the text.

Chapter four examined archaeological and numismatic evidence from the ninth and tenth century trade routes between the Caspian Sea and the mid-Volga region to Scandinavia that may relate to accounts of the Rus in the Arabic sources. The first point to make is that the Scandinavian element is widely represented throughout most of western Eurasia, with objects discovered as far east as the lower Volga region. Likewise, at the other end of the trade network, numerous artefacts of oriental provenance have been excavated. More specifically, many artefacts unearthed in Scandinavia and the Baltic show resemblances and parallels with objects unearthed in the archaeological sites connected with the cultures of the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. Further evidence includes Turkic and Arabic symbols and letters incised on coins. It is argued that this material has the potential to expand and diversify our perception of the cultural contacts of the Rus with the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. On the whole, this material may provide insights into certain aspects of a process of acculturation necessary for the Rus to conduct trade effectively with their reciprocating or host cultures.

Importantly, a marked concordance was established in the chronology of the material finds, especially of the dirhams, and the written evidence discussed in chapters two and three. Both types of sources coincide in this respect in their narrative of the pattern of Rus presence in the east. In this respect, there can be little doubt that the first half of the tenth century is by far the most important period. As for the written material, it is suggested that the significant increase in reports on the Rus among the Muslim writers in this period relates to the former's increased presence and impact in regions (Khazaria and Bulghar on the Volga) and occupations (trade and military activity). This greater general visibility of the Rus was clearly of some importance to the Islamic world.

Chapter five discusses and summarises the evidence of the contacts between the Rus and the Turkic peoples. On the whole the sources fail to elucidate the precise relationship between the various groups of Rus as they are represented in an enormously vast geography over a long period of time. What is clear, however, is that, the depiction of the Rus in the Arabic sources is significantly different from other early medieval written sources, even to the extent that it is

justified to speak of distinct eastern ('Volga-Caspian') and western (Kievan) groups of the Rus. In this context, their emphasis on the relationship between the Rus and the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars is particularly significant.

Addressing the issue of whether reflections of this situation may be found in Scandinavian language or literature, we have ventured two interpretations of possible loanwords. The first is that *gusir* or *gusisnautar* from the saga of *Orvar-Oddr* may reflect an underlying form *Gbuзз*, the Turkic people famous for their archery skills, which we have mentioned on several occasions here. The second loanword in question, the *bezmen* and variants thereof, may possibly derive from the language of the Volga Bulgars. Finally, we touch on Ibn Fadlan's account of the Volga Bulgar custom of hanging wise men in trees, which may have contributed to a motif connected with Odin in Snorri Sturluson's writings.

Chapter five has concluded with a discussion of the issue of a Rus kaghanate, a much disputed subject in early Rus scholarship for which several theories have been ventured. The main problems arise from the source material, which is spread over several centuries yet provides very restricted information about such an entity. In addition to the most thorough study of this subject to date carried out by Peter B. Golden, it is argued here that an important factor behind the Arabic references to a kaghan of the Rus may have been the association as well as certain similarities, perceived or real, between the Rus and the Khazars and other Turkic peoples as well.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the writings of Arabic geographers and historians in the ninth and the tenth centuries are in their own right a rich source of information on the early history of the Rus. Furthermore, in the light of the volume and the diversity of evidence they contain on the links between the Rus and the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars, and its multifarious impact on Rus identity, it is safe to say that this connection has been understudied in the previous historiography of the early Rus.

Importantly, this material does not only add to our resources on the history of the early Rus, it likewise provides an insight into the complex dynamics of

acculturation and identity resulting from the contacts between the Scandinavian diasporas abroad during the so-called Viking Age and the host cultures with which they interacted. In particular, it is hoped that this research has identified an alternative dimension of the history of the east-faring contingents of the Scandinavian expansion in the ninth and tenth centuries. In any event it seems clear, that the depiction of the early Rus in the Arabic sources is significantly different from that conveyed by the later text of the *Primary Chronicle*, which has enjoyed a certain preference in modern historiography on the early Rus. True, the Arabic written corpus does not present a continuous narrative of the history of the Rus, but the volume and number of accounts is sufficient at least to attempt a collage from these texts. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the material evidence with the Arabic sources seems to confirm, at least in part, the picture drawn by the latter.

Recently, the problematisation of ethnicity and identity has increasingly been incorporated into Scandinavian and Viking age studies, in keeping with trends in historiography in general.¹ The field is vast, and steadily expanding, encompassing various academic cultures and trends, reflecting different emphases in their respective discourses on identity and ethnicity. In their time, the early Rus represented one of the most important links between Europe and the oriental world, coinciding in their ventures with the seminal ninth century which saw the apogee of the Khazar kaghanate, and with the Golden age of Islam and its northwards spread towards the Eurasian steppe. At the same time the highly mobile Rus served as important carriers of culture, both of their own, and that of the peoples with which they interacted. Our findings here suggest that there is ample room for more research on this matter by scholars of the Viking Age, especially those dealing with the history of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, but by no means exclusively so. A regional comparison, for instance, of the acculturation processes associated with trade may yield useful parallels. Further research needs also to be carried out on many of the sources, both written and material, which we have not been able to explore in sufficient depths in this

¹ Cf. for instance the Viking Identities Network, an initiative undertaken by the Universities of Nottingham, Birmingham and Leicester, with the stated aim of stimulating “both academic and popular discussion about the creation of “Viking”, “Norse” and “hybrid” identities in the Viking Age, and their 21st century legacy” (J. Jesch, ‘Myth and Cultural Memory in the Viking Diaspora’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, no. 4 (2008), 221–25 (p. 222)).

study. Archaeological excavations continue to produce more data in the form of objects and coins that may significantly contribute to our understanding of the eastern Scandinavians' cultural contacts with the Turkic and Islamic worlds. No pretention of exhaustive analysis of this ever-growing corpus has been upheld here. Further examination of the Arabic sources is also desirable, both of their contents and their context, as well as their standing vis-à-vis other written material regarding the Rus. It is hoped that this dissertation can serve as a springboard for such future studies.

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Abbreviations

- BGA *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, transl. and ed. by M. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1870–1894)
- EI2 *Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2009)
- Eir *Encyclopedia of Iran*, ed. by E. Yarshater (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982–)
- GAL Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1937–1949)

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