

Among the Norse Tribes

The Remarkable Account of Ibn Fadlan

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Photographed by Eirik Irgens Johnsen

More than a millennium ago, as fleets of Viking raiders were striking fear into the hearts of coast- and river-dwellers throughout western Europe, other Norsemen of more mercantile inclination were making their way east. With no less boldness and stamina, bearing luxurious furs and enticing nodules of amber, they penetrated the vast steppes of what is today Ukraine, Belarus and Russia and entered Central Asia. There they met Muslim traders who paid for Norse wares with silver coins, which the Vikings themselves did not mint, and which they coveted.

Their routes were various, and by the ninth and 10th centuries, a regular trade network had grown up. Some Norsemen traveled overland and by river, while others sailed over both the Black and Caspian Seas, joined caravans and rode camelback as far as Baghdad, which was then under Abbasid rule and populated by nearly a million souls. There, the Scandinavian traders found an emporium beyond their wildest dreams, for their fjord-rimmed homelands had only recently seen the emergence of a few rudimentary towns.

To the Arabs of Baghdad, the presence of the Norsemen probably did not come as much of a surprise, for the Arabs were long accustomed to meeting people from different cultures and civilizations. They were also keen and literate observers. Abbasid historians and caliphal envoys put to paper eyewitness accounts of the roving Scandinavians, leaving a historical legacy that is shedding new light both on Viking history and on a little-known chapter of early Islamic history.

From the time of the first Viking attacks on England in the late eighth century, the 300-year epoch known as the Viking Age found the Scandinavians venturing farther afield than any other Europeans. They colonized nearly the entire North Atlantic, even establishing a short-lived settlement in North America about the turn of the millennium. It was largely the Vikings from Norway and Denmark who made these western voyages, but waves of so-called "Eastern Vikings," predominantly Swedes, headed southeast to establish trading centers at Kiev and Novgorod, where the elite among them became princes and rulers. It was in these lands that they were observed by several Muslim historians.

The Arab writers did not call the tall, blond traders "Vikings," but by the ethnonym *Rus* (pronounced "Roos"). The origin of this term is obscure, and though some claim it stems from the West Finnic name for Sweden, *Ruotsi*, there is little agreement. Yet consistently, Byzantine and Arab writers referred to the Swedish traders and settlers, as well as the local populations among whom they settled and intermarried, as *Rus*, and this is the source of the modern name of Russia.

This name was applied only in the East. In France and Sicily, the Vikings were known as Normans. An elite guard of the Byzantine emperors, composed of eastern Scandinavians, was known as Varangians, but that term never came into widespread use outside the region. In al-

Andalus, or Islamic Spain, they were known as *al-majus*, or "fire-worshippers," a pejorative reference to their paganism.

Besides the Scandinavians themselves, only the British called the marauders "Vikings," and this word may come from *vik*, or bay, and *Viken*, as Oslo Fjord was called, from which the earliest Viking ships emerged. Other authorities maintain that the name came from the Old Norse term *i viking*, which is the equivalent of "a-raiding," as in "they went a-raiding down the Atlantic coast." But "Viking" was never a blanket term for the whole people of the region until it became a popular, modern misuse. "We can refer to Viking-Age society, but not all Scandinavians were Vikings," says Jesse Byock, who is professor of Old Norse literature at the University of California at Los Angeles. "They themselves used the term to refer to raiders from the region, but it certainly didn't describe the local farmers who were back on the land."

In western Europe, journal entries about Viking raids were often penned by monks and priests whose interests lay in painting them in the darkest, most savage colors. But in the East, the story was different. There the Rus were primarily explorers, colonizers and tradesmen, and although they were well-armed, Muslim accounts describe them as merchant-warriors whose primary business was trade. The Rus were after the Abbasid-issued dirhams flooding the region, and though at times, in the more remote regions, they procured these by exacting tribute, they largely traded with Muslims who had themselves ventured north and west to find opportunities for commerce.

We would in fact know little about these Rus, these Norsemen in the East, were it not for Muslim chroniclers, Ibn Fadlan, whose ninth-century *Risala (Letter)* is the richest account of all, kept a journal that details his encounters with the Rus along the Volga, as well as with many other peoples. A century later, al-Tartushi, a merchant from Córdoba, described a Danish market town, passing down to us a rare glimpse of the Norsemen in their domestic setting. Other accounts, such as al-Mas'udi's *Meadows of Gold*, written in 943, and al-Mukaddasi's *The Best Organization of Knowledge of the Regions*, composed after 985, were briefer in their mentions of the Rus, but collectively they were all trailblazers in what was then the flourishing field of Islamic geography, a response to the thirst for knowledge about the vast Islamic world and the regions beyond it.

Unlike Europeans, Arab chroniclers bore no grudge against the Rus, and thus the Arab reports are more detached and, in the eyes of many scholars today, more credible. Most experts acknowledge that the Vikings were, in general, victims of a medieval "bad press," for the military excursions of Charlemagne and other Europeans of the time were no less ruthless than theirs. Yet the Norsemen had only a runic alphabet, suited for no more than inscribing grave-stones and place-markers, and were hardly in a position to set the record straight themselves. Their oral sagas of heroes and gods would not be written down until the 12th century.

Many of the Muslim accounts have been translated into European languages over the past two centuries, and they are proving valuable in interpreting archeological evidence that continues to emerge. Hundreds of Viking Age graves and buried hoards, it turns out, contain caches of still-gleaming Arab dirhams, "the coin that helped fuel the Viking Age," according to Thomas S. Noonan of the University of Minnesota. Noonan is one of the world's leading experts on

medieval Scandinavian ties with the Muslim world, and a specialist in Viking numismatic history.

It was largely the dirham that had lured the Scandinavians eastward in the first place, says Noonan. Silver had become their favored medium of exchange, but with no indigenous sources of the precious metal in the northern forests, they went in pursuit of it far and wide. Arab merchants had started circulating silver coins in the Volga region in the late eighth century, and Scandinavian traders, intent on finding the source of the lucre, set a course across the Baltic in their shallow-draft longboats.

In Russia, they braved the uncharted river systems, portaging from one tributary to another, shooting rapids and fending off hostile nomads until they reached the first eastern trade centers, those of the Turkic Khazars. The Khazars had become the dominant power in the Caucasian steppe by the middle of the seventh century, and they played a major role in trade between the region and the Islamic world for the next 300 years. Here, in the network of trading stations along the mighty rivers, the Swedes would have carried on active commerce with Arabs, Persians and Greeks. From there, some of the Scandinavians sailed down to the Black Sea, toward the regions they called "Sarkland," a name that may refer either to the lands of the Saracens (today Azerbaijan and northern Iran); to the Khazar fortress of Sarkel, at the mouth of the Don on the Black Sea coast; or to *serk*, the Norse word for silk, which was widely traded in the region at the time.

The earliest reference by Muslim writers to the roving Norsemen was made at the beginning of the ninth century by Ibn Khurradadhbih, a Khurasani bon-vivant who headed Caliph al-Mu'tamid's postal and intelligence-gathering service. In 844 he wrote about the travels of the *saqalibah*, a term generally used for fair-haired, ruddy-complexioned Europeans. They came in their boats, he wrote, "bringing beaver-skins, and skins of black foxes, and swords, from the furthest part of the Slav lands down to the Black Sea." Rus traders, he wrote, transported their wares by camel from Jurjan, a town at the southeastern end of the Caspian Sea, to Baghdad, where *saqalibah* servants, who had learned Arabic, acted as interpreters.

Baghdad, then a circular city about 19 kilometers (12 mi) in diameter, was lavishly embellished with parks, marble palaces, gardens, promenades and finely built mosques. The Arabian Gulf trader, geographer and encyclopedist Yakut al-Rumi describes how both sides of the river were fronted by the palaces, kiosks, gardens and parks of the nobles, with marble steps leading down to the water's edge, where thousands of gondolas festooned with little flags sailed by.

This was a far cry from the settlements occupied by the Rus. Astronomer and geographer Ibn Rustah, writing between 903 and 913, noted that "they have no villages, no cultivated fields." Ibn Rustah described the Rus as sporting excellent swords, and wearing baggy trousers that were tight below the knee—a style which reflected the Eastern influence in their wardrobes. They were, in his estimation, heroic men who displayed great loyalty to each other. But their primary interest in the region was acquisitive: "Their only occupation is trading in sable and squirrel and other kinds of skins, which they sell to those who will buy from them," he observed. "In payment, they take coins, which they keep in their belts."

The Vikings paid little attention to the face value of the coins; rather, they used an Arab system of weights to measure the silver on portable balance scales. When it suited them, the coins were hewn into smaller pieces, melted down into ingots or fashioned into arm-rings for subsequent "hack-silver" transactions. The amount of Islamic silver reaching the region increased dramatically in the 10th century, when vast silver deposits were discovered in the Hindu Kush. This enabled the Khurasan-based Samanid dynasty to mint large numbers of coins and to become, numismatic evidence shows, the main supplier of dirhams.

The Arabs, for their part, were eager to have caps and coats made of black fox, the most valued of all the furs, according to al-Mas'udi. Al-Mukaddasi noted that from the Rus one could obtain furs of sable, Siberian squirrel, ermine, marten, weasel, mink, fox and colored hare.

Other wares traded by the Rus, as inventoried by several Muslim observers, included wax and birch bark, fish teeth, honey, goat skins and horse hides, falcons, acorns, hazelnuts, cattle, swords and armor. Amber, the reddish-gold fossilized tree resin found along the Baltic shoreline, was highly prized in the East and became a mainstay of Scandinavian trade. Also valued in the East were the slaves that the Rus captured from among the Eastern European peoples—Slavs, from which English has derived the word *slave*. According to the itinerant geographer Ibn Hawkal, writing in 977, the Rus slave trade ran "from Spain to Egypt."

But the most important eyewitness account of the Rus is of Ahmed ibn Fadlan, a writer about whom little is known, but whose *Risala* has been translated into several languages. Key segments of it are universally cited in modern books about Vikings. It was his account that inspired author Michael Crichton's 1976 novel *Eaters of the Dead*, the basis of this year's film *The Thirteenth Warrior* by Touchstone/Disney. "Ibn Fadlan was unique of all the sources," says Noonan. "He was there, and you can trace his exact path. He describes how the caravans traveled, how they would cross a river. He tells you about the flora and fauna along the way. He shows us exactly how the trade functions. There is nothing else like it."

Ibn Fadlan was a *faqih*, an expert in Islamic jurisprudence, who served as secretary of a delegation sent by Caliph al-Muqtadir in 921 to the king of the Bulgars, who had requested help building a fort and a mosque, as well as personal instruction in the teachings of Islam. The Bulgars were a Turkic-speaking branch of the people whom the Khazars had split in the seventh century. One group migrated west, where they assimilated with Slavs and founded what became modern Bulgaria, west of the Black Sea; the others turned north toward the middle Volga region, where they continued to chafe under the rule of the Khazars, whose domination of the north Caucasus and Caspian region marked the northern limits of Abbasid power. In seeking assistance from Baghdad, the king of the Bulgars was seeking an alliance against the Khazars.

Presumably in order to avoid Khazar lands, the caliph's delegation took a lengthy and circuitous route to the Bulgar capital, passing east of the Caspian Sea. Once there, it was Ibn Fadlan who gave religious instruction to the Bulgar king, so impressing him that the king gave him the *kunya*, or nickname, "al-Siddiq," "the truthful"—the same *kunya* that had once been earned by Abu Bakr, the first caliph of Islam.

All told, the delegation covered some 4000 kilometers (2500 mi). In his *Risala*, Ibn Fadlan described the numerous peoples he encountered, and roughly one-fifth of his account is devoted to the Rus. "I have never seen more perfect physical specimens, tall as date palms, blond and ruddy," he wrote. "Each man has an axe, a sword, and a knife and keeps each by him at all times." The men, he observed, were tattooed with dark-green figures "from fingernails to neck."

Viking arts of jewelry and bodily ornamentation were well-developed, and Ibn Fadlan described the Rus women as wearing neck rings of gold and silver, "one for each 10,000 dirhams which her husband is worth; some women have many. Their most prized ornaments are green glass beads of clay, which are found on the ships. They trade beads among themselves and pay a dirham for a bead. They string them as necklaces...." They also wore festoons of colored beads, large oval brooches from which dangled such items as knives, keys and combs, and what Ibn Fadlan described as "breast-boxes made out of gold, silver and wood."

He had harsh words, however, for Rus hygiene: "They are the filthiest of God's creatures," he observed, and although he acknowledged that they washed their hands, faces and heads every day, he was appalled that they did so "in the dirtiest and filthiest fashion possible" in a communal basin of water, an ancient Germanic custom that caused understandable revulsion in a Muslim who typically performed ablutions only in poured or running water. (In the same year, Ibn Rustah, however, commended the Rus he observed as being "clean in their dress and kind to their slaves.")

Their contact with Islam led some among the Rus to embrace the religion, though Ibn Fadlan astutely noted that old habits still had their pull: "They are very fond of pork and many of them who have assumed the path of Islam miss it very much." The Rus had also relished *nabith*, a fermented drink Ibn Fadlan often mentioned as part of their daily fare.

Yet most of the Rus continued to observe their own religious practices, which included the offering of sacrifices. Ibn Rustah makes mention of a professional priesthood of Rus shamans (whom he calls *attibah*) who enjoyed very high status, and who had the power to select as a sacrifice to their gods whichever men, women or cattle they fancied.

Witnessing a band of Rus merchants celebrating the safe completion of a Volga voyage in 922, Ibn Fadlan described how they prayed to their gods and offered sacrifices to wooden figures stuck into the ground, and they begged their deities to send merchants with plentiful silver coins to buy what they had to sell.

He also witnessed, along the Volga, the dramatic funeral of a chieftain who was cremated with his ship. His oft-quoted description of this rite is one of the most remarkable documents of the Viking Age, filled as it is with grim details of the dead leader laid out in his boat amid a treasury of expensive items, rich foods and strong drink, as well as a dog, horses, oxen, and poultry, and accompanied by the body of a slave girl who had volunteered for the honor of being slain and burned with her master.

Beyond this, Ibn Fadlan was privy to scenes of drunkenness and lewd behavior that were clearly shocking to a pious, erudite scholar from Baghdad. But he was no moralizer: After making note of the conduct, he moved on in his narrative without condescension.

Other Muslim writers found some Rus traits praiseworthy, particularly their prowess in battle. The philosopher and historian Miskawayh described them as men with "vast frames and great courage" who carried an impressive arsenal of weapons, including swords, spears, shields, daggers, axes and hammers. He noted that their swords "are in great demand to this day for their sharpness and excellence."

While the usual relationship of the Rus with Baghdad, Khazaria and other Muslim lands was one of peaceable trade, this was not always so. Along the shores of the Caspian Sea, Rus tribes turned their prized weapons against Muslims twice in the 10th century, once attacking Abaskun on the eastern Caspian in 910, and then penetrating the oil country around Baku in 912, taking rich spoils and killing thousands. Of this latter campaign, al-Mas'udi wrote that when the people of the Khazar state heard of this, about 150,000 of them were joined by Christians from the town of Itil, and this joint force marched to the Volga, where the Rus fleet had returned, and decimated it. The few Rus who escaped were later finished off by Bulgars and others.

Ibn Hawkal tells how in 943 another large Rus armada reached the prosperous trading town of Bardha'a on the Caspian's south shore, where the Rus slaughtered 5000 inhabitants. But their occupation of the town broke down within months, apparently as the result of a dysentery epidemic induced among them by a secret "cup of death" offered to them by the women of the city.

Other than Ibn Fadlan, few if any Muslims from the Middle East or Central Asia made the trek to the Norsemen's distant homelands. However, Muslims in al-Andalus, in the southern two-thirds of the Iberian Peninsula, could travel to Scandinavia relatively easily by sea, and several appear to have done just that, probably to trade. In the mid-10th century, a Córdoba merchant named al-Tartushi visited the Danish market town of Hedeby. He was none too impressed, for although, at 24 hectares (60 acres) in area, Hedeby was the largest Scandinavian town of the time, al-Tartushi found it a far cry from the elegance, organization and comfort of Córdoba. Hedeby was noisy and filthy, he wrote, with the pagan inhabitants hanging animal sacrifices on poles in front of their houses. The people of Hedeby subsisted chiefly on fish, "for there was so much of it." He noted that Norse women enjoyed the right to divorce: "They part with their husbands whenever they like." Men and women alike, he found, used "an artificial make-up for the eyes; when they use it their beauty never fades, but increases."

But such scant contact did not do much to help bridge vast cultural gaps. Toledo jurist Sa'id reasoned that the pagan Norsemen were affected by their wintry origins: "Because the sun does not shed its rays directly over their heads, their climate is cold and the atmosphere cloudy. Consequently their temperaments have become cold and their humors rude, while their bodies have grown large, their complexions light and their hair long."

From the early years of the Viking Age, the Arabs of al-Andalus had referred to the Scandinavians as *al-majus*, a word which meant "fire-worshiping pagans" and was usually

directed at Zoroastrians. That these two groups were lumped into the same term leads some modern scholars to speculate on early contacts among Norse traders and Zoroastrians in Persia and Mesopotamia.

Andalusia was not spared the Viking attacks that the rest of Europe had experienced. Historian Ahmad al-Ya'qubi, writing in 843-844, tells of the attack on Ishbiliyya (Seville) by "the Majus who are called Rus." Ibn Qutiya, a 10th-century Córdoba historian, wrote that the attackers were probably Danish pirates who had sailed up the Guadalquivir River. They were repelled by the Andalusian forces, who used catapults to hurl flaming balls of naphtha that sank 30 ships. Amir 'Abd al-Rah-man II then managed to arrange a truce. The following year, legend has it, he dispatched as envoy to the king of *al-majus* a handsome poet, Yahya ibn Hakam al-Bakri, known as al-Ghazal ("the gazelle") for the grace of his appearance and his verse, who carried a gift for the king and his wife, Queen Noud. The voyage supposedly took al-Ghazal either to Ireland or Denmark, where he wrote that the queen "stays the sun of beauty from darkening." In fact, al-Ghazal's mission was not to the Norsemen at all, but to the Byzantine emperor, and the survival of the legend to this day indicates how large the Vikings loomed in the popular imagination of the time.

Despite the truce, the Danes returned to attack Spain again in 859 under the command of Hastein and Bjorn Ironsides, two of the most famous Viking leaders. But their 62 dragon ships were no match for the Umayyad forces. After the rout, the survivors slipped through the Straits of Gibraltar to raid along the Moroccan coast, which prompted another Muslim observer to record that "al-Majus—may God curse them!—invaded the little Moroccan state of Nakur and pillaged it. They took into captivity all the inhabitants with the exception of those who saved their lives by flight." The marauding fleet then went on to harry the south of France and Italy, where they sacked the town of Luna on the northwest coast, believing it to be Rome. Some Arab sources say they reached Greece and even Egypt. When they returned to the Iberian coast two years after their first attack, they were defeated again, and Vikings never returned to the Mediterranean.

So it was also in the East. The Viking Age, so dependent on Arab silver, did not survive the dwindling of the stream of dirhams in the late 10th century as the Samanid state collapsed, its silver mines near exhaustion. Noonan points out that the silver coins were increasingly debased as time went on: "A silver content of approximately 90 percent in the year 1000 had declined to a silver content of about five percent half a century later. Understandably, Rus merchants no longer wanted such coins."

The silver-seeking Rus retreated west. Those who had not fully established their lives among the local populations of Russia sailed home, where their crystallizing nations became today's Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark.

A millennium later, scholars would turn to Ibn Fadlan, al-Tartushi, al-Mas'udi and the other Arab writers to trace their sojourns and to seek out in burial hoards and mounds the dirhams the Norsemen had carried home. According to Noonan, some 100,000 dirham coins, most deposited between the years 900 and 1030, have been unearthed to date in Sweden alone, and there are more than a thousand recorded individual hoards of five or more coins recorded throughout Scandinavia, the Baltic countries and Russia. In addition to inscriptions, the Muslim coins bear

the year and place of minting—vital details for modern numismatists and archeologists. One excellent find in Uppland, Sweden contained a mixture of coins minted in Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Isfahan and Tashkent.

Soon more of this knowledge will be widely available. Noonan's catalogue of dirham hoards from throughout western Eurasia will be published by the Numismatics Institute of the University of Stockholm. His first book on the subject, a collection of articles titled *The Islamic World, Russia and the Vikings, 750-900: The Numismatic Evidence*, was published by Ashgate in 1998 (ISBN 0-86078-657-9).

Similarly, in Norway, former University of Tehran archeologist and numismatist Houshang Khazaei has completed an English-language catalogue of Kufic silver coins found in Norway, many of which are currently on display at the University Museum of Cultural Heritage in Oslo. "We are beginning to see new interest in this subject," says Khazaei, whose work will soon be published. Other relics of Viking-Arab trade have been found in Scandinavia as well: fine beads of rock crystal or carnelian, Persian glass, silks, vessels and ornaments. In addition, the trade with Arabs left its mark on Nordic languages, with cognate words such as *kaffe*, *arsenal*, *kattun* (cotton), *alkove*, *sofa* and *kalfatre* (asphalt, used for boat caulking). One historian even suggests that the inspiration for the sails of Viking ships came from the Arab dhows that the Norse traders first observed on the Black Sea.

But the greatest debt Scandinavians owe the Muslims lies in the time-worn pages of the manuscripts. There, long-silent voices rise to help historians, archeologists and linguists clarify a much-maligned past. Haakon Stang, in his 1996 University of Oslo dissertation *The Naming of Russia*, thanked the Arabs who "on their way, let us hear and see and sense what once happened—and was past, otherwise irretrievably lost."

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