

# Lost in Translation?

## Ibn Fadlan and the Great Unwashed ABSTRACTS

Ibn Fadlan's eyewitness account of his mission to the Middle Volga on behalf of the Abbasid government is well-enough known to have inspired Michael Crichton's 1976 novel *Eaters of the Dead: The Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan Relating His Experiences with the Northmen in AD 922* (later republished as *The 13th Warrior* and made into a film of the same name in 1999). However, Ibn Fadlan's text raises many questions of meaning and interpretation, and we have no other detailed contemporary written evidence about the Bulgars and Rus whom he encountered on the Volga in 922. Mastery of many disciplines is needed to put Ibn Fadlan's report into context. The text has recently been re-edited and translated into English and Russian, and the time seems ripe for a fully interdisciplinary approach. This is what our conference will attempt, drawing together experts on Arabic literature and history, Volga Bulgar archaeology, the world of the Eurasian steppes and the Vikings, and on travel in general in the Early Middle Ages.

The problems of transmission of Ibn Fadlan's text will be set out, as will the likely purpose of his mission to the north and his reasons for writing the report. Ibn Fadlan shows awareness of the vast quantities of silver and other wealth in circulation in the north, and represents himself as a staunch and skilful proponent of the superior values and teachings of Islam, in the face of unbelievers like the Viking Rus. At the same time, the Byzantines were taking closer interest in the regions north of the steppes, forging commercial links with the Rus—Ibn Fadlan's 'Great Unwashed'—and travellers were writing down their experiences in other parts of Europe, too. Several quite different cultures were interacting with each other, while forging new political structures on the edge of the steppes. Ibn Fadlan's account offers unique testimony to much of this and the outcome of this conference should be a more rounded assessment of Ibn Fadlan in his tenth-century context.



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## Session I. The bigger picture

### **Where was Ibn Fadlan coming from? (The Muslim world)**

Hugh Kennedy

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The Abbasid caliphs headed a Muslim empire that extended from Tunisia through Egypt, Syria, Arabia and Persia to Uzbekistan and the frontiers of India. But unlike previous conquerors, the Abbasids presided over a multicultural empire where conversion was a relatively peaceful business. They developed sophisticated systems of government, administration and court etiquette, and this 'golden era' of Islamic civilization saw the flowering of Arabic philosophy, mathematics and Persian literature. However, by the tenth century the caliphate was in trouble, facing secessions and military rebellions, religious contention, and political upheavals in Baghdad. Despite all this, the Abbasids continued to show great cultural vitality, wealth and prestige. Their desire to spread the Word of the Prophet was, if anything, stronger, and they retained the capacity to do this. It is against this background that one should see Ibn Fadlan's mission on behalf of the Abbasid government to the Volga Bulgars, whose leadership had quite recently adopted Islam.

### **Distant peoples: Ibn Fadlan and the ethnography of Eastern Europe**

Walter Pohl

*University of Vienna*

Since Herodotus, Greek and Latin authors had described the 'barbarians' beyond the Black Sea using a mixture of contemporary information, ethnographic *topoi* and traditional literary stylisation, and this continued unbroken into the Byzantine period. This paper will discuss Ibn Fadlan in the context of this tradition. In particular, the steppe peoples and their classification were a controversial topic among early medieval authors. Later, the Slavs and their ways of life became an issue. In what ways does Ibn Fadlan's approach differ from Romano-Byzantine perceptions? And what were the cognitive tools and attitudes that he shared with non-Islamic authors? The paper will attempt to sketch some ethnographic 'modes' which may allow us to place Ibn Fadlan in a broader context of describing distant peoples.

### **Other goings-on: Ibn Fadlan between the Byzantine and North Atlantic worlds**

Jonathan Shepard

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Chronologically, Ibn Fadlan's account is more or less equidistant between two sets of descriptions of conditions to the east of the North Sea and north of the Black Sea, the writings associable with Alfred of Wessex and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. Yet things from the Islamic world had been arriving in the North Atlantic world for generations before Ibn Fadlan wrote. One may ask why it took so long for some awareness of goings-on far to the north to register in Islamic writings, and wonder at the apparent dearth of information about eastern lands and peoples at Alfred's court, in contrast with the apparently ample data about the north available to Constantine. There are obvious answers—accidents of source survival, for example, and Constantine's greater proximity to the people he describes than Alfred's. But rapid change was underway in the north, which Ibn Fadlan's work symptomizes. Had someone with all Alfred's qualities been on the English throne around 950, the outcome might well have been a work more akin to Constantine's than to Alfred's, in terms of data about goings-on between the Baltic and the Black Sea.

### Who is the real Ibn Fadlan? Some observations on editing and translating the text

James Montgomery

*University of Cambridge*

My paper will present some reflections on the challenges of editing and translating Ibn Fadlan's account for the Library of Arabic Literature. I will consider a number of key features of the account including: the Arabic used by Ibn Fadlan as preserved in the Mashhad manuscript; the structure of the text as preserved in the Mashhad manuscript; Ibn Fadlan, Yaqut and the Khazars.

### Was Abu Dulaf al-Khazraji the editor of the 'Mashhad text'?

Luke Treadwell

*University of Oxford*

The Mashhad manuscript, discovered by Zeki Validi Togan in 1923, contains the only surviving extended version of Ibn Fadlan's travelogue, in addition to a partial text of Ibn al-Faqih's geography and two travel memoirs written by Abu Dulaf al-Khazraji. In the introduction to his *Ibn Fadlan's Reisebericht* (1939), Togan noted that the compilers of the composite Mashhad text were the same two anonymous patrons to whom Abu Dulaf dedicated his two *Risalas*. The identity of these patrons has remained elusive in spite of attempts to link them to eminent literary figures of the age (among them, the wazirs al-Jayhani and al-Sahib b. 'Abbad). This should not surprise us. Abu Dulaf was a well-known literary trickster, troublemaker and scatological poet of the fourth century AH, who delighted in overturning convention and shocking his audiences. His two 'patrons' were not men of flesh and blood, but literary devices invented by him to conceal the fact that he himself was the compiler of these texts. Why did Abu Dulaf put these four texts together in a single work? Was he merely a compiler or did he exercise editorial control over the material he gathered? These and other contextual questions relating to the Mashhad text add a further layer of complexity to the enigma of Ibn Fadlan's *Kitab*.

### The *Book* of Ibn Fadlan: literary monument and historical source

Viacheslav Kuleshov

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This paper will deal with Ibn Fadlan's account as both literary monument and historical source. As a literary monument, it should be considered in the context of Arabic literature's tradition of narrative alongside entertainment. As a historical source, it sheds light on the culture not only of the Islamic world, but also of Eurasian steppe-nomads and of the Eastern European polities of the Volga Bulgars, the Rus and the Khazars. A crucial feature of Ibn Fadlan's text is its blend of compositional and narrative elements, which can be broken down into three textual layers: (1) the narrative in chronological sequence, which forms a kind of diplomatic report; (2) observations of an ethnographic type about the distinctive cultures, habits, religions and ruling elites of the peoples of Central Asia and Eastern Europe; and (3) tales of wonders, marvels and tall stories (*mirabilia, al-'aġa'ib*), which have analogies in the folklore of the Middle Volga region and Northern Eurasia.

### **Vikings on the Volga? Ibn Fadlan and the rituals of the *Rūsiyyah***

Neil Price

*University of Uppsala*

For almost a century since the discovery of the Mashhad manuscript, Ibn Fadlan's account of his encounter with the people he called the *Rūsiyyah* has been central to studies of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion and social behaviour. His eyewitness descriptions of what appear to be offerings to wooden idols, and above all the lengthy relation of a ship cremation ceremony, are without parallel in their vivid immediacy and detail. But a key question remains: were his *Rūsiyyah* really 'Vikings' at all, and even if they were, to what degree did their habits and practices reflect the influence of other cultures with which they came into contact? In an attempt to address this issue, the paper will review key aspects of the rituals he describes, setting them in a wider Scandinavian and cross-cultural context. They will be compared with a number of other textual and archaeological sources from the Viking Age to the early modern period—some familiar, others perhaps unexpected—leading to some firm conclusions.

### **Ibn Fadlan and the Rus on the Middle Volga: identities, ethnicities, cultures**

Þórir Jónsson Hraundal

*University of Iceland*

Among Ibn Fadlan's invaluable and unique descriptions of the peoples he encountered on his journey from Baghdad to Bulgar is the famous account of the Rus (or *Rūsiyyah*). While they are regarded by most scholars as Scandinavian Vikings conducting trade at this important nexus with the Samanids and the Muslim world, there has been a certain resistance to addressing seriously the cultural spectrum within which these interactions took place.

The Middle Volga and the Caspian regions were in this period largely under the dominion of Turkic peoples, the most important of whom were the Khazars, but also the Bulgar and the Ghuzz (Oghuz). All these peoples were also to a varying extent influenced by Islam and by their political and economic contacts with the caliphate.

Ibn Fadlan's description, as well as the evidence from other Arabic writers of the period, indicates that the Rus maintained long-standing and close contacts with the Volga Bulgars and also with the Khazars to the south. This context is important not only for our reading of Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus, but also for our understanding of the eastern chapter of the Viking Age in general.

## Session IV. Coins and routes

### Rus, routes and sites

Veronika Murasheva

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In the Viking Age, the vast expanses of Eastern Europe, inhabited by Baltic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric and Turkic peoples, were turned into a network of trans-European waterways. A decisive role in this process was played by Scandinavian incomers whose name (Rus) may well reflect their activities: 'rowers' is one of its possible translations. In search of wealth and glory, these incomers opened up routes to the Byzantine empire and the Arab caliphate. The river routes are marked archaeologically by coin hoards and by settlements of various sizes some of which became key sites for East European state formation, particularly in the cases of Rus and Volga Bulgaria. This paper examines the functions and fates of two such sites on different routes: Supruty, a small settlement on the Don, and Gnezdovo, a large proto-urban centre on the Upper Dnieper, and thus the 'way from the Varangians to the Greeks.'

### The Volga Bulgar imitative coinage

Marek Jankowiak

*University of Oxford*

On the basis of the extensive die-study of dirham imitations conducted over the last several decades by Gert Rispling from Stockholm—which together with Luke Treadwell I am currently preparing for publication—I will present an overview of the Volga Bulgar imitative coinage. I will try to establish a chronology of this coinage and highlight its great complexity, exemplified in particular by the die-chain K101, composed of *ca* 130 dies (including an authentic Samanid die), most of which apparently date to the 930s. We are currently able to date very few imitative dies to the 920s, when Ibn Fadlan visited Bulgar and depicted it as the main meeting point between Scandinavian and Muslim merchants. I will reflect on this apparent contradiction and propose an interpretation that provides both a rationale for the production of dirham imitations and a check on the veracity of Ibn Fadlan's description of Bulgar.

### **Viking-Age markets and emporia**

Søren Michael Sindbæk

*University of Aarhus*

The Viking Age in Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea area saw the emergence of permanent, specialised markets and emporia at harbour sites and other nodal points for long-distance travel. The Scandinavian merchant warriors who reached the Bulgar market in the tenth century would have been well acquainted with urbanised trade in their home regions, and their actions would have reflected knowledge of the trade organisation and law, codes of conduct and cultural communication of these places. Conversely, they carried back home aspects of eastern trade culture. Cross-cultural exchange within the network of long-distance trade was facilitated by the fact that interaction was focused within the 'small world' of emporia. This presentation outlines the history of the Scandinavian Viking-Age urban markets and emporia and exemplifies how the connections forged by the likes of Ibn Fadlan's Rus affected the culture of trade in these places.

### **What was Volga Bulgaria?**

Leonard Nedashkovsky

*Kazan Federal University*

The polity of Volga Bulgaria was based on the Middle Volga from the start of the tenth century until the coming of the Mongols in 1236. It was unusual for a medieval state, since throughout its existence Volga Bulgaria was surrounded by peoples who had yet to develop firm political structures. The semi-nomadic Bulgar groupings, which had moved to the Middle Volga from the Lower Don and Sea of Azov, started to transition intensively towards a sedentary way of life from the early tenth century onwards, establishing both cities and rural villages with developed crafts and trade. The paper will consider their political institutions and the nature of the Volga Bulgars' society, as well as surveying their main trade links.

### **The nature and chronology of ninth- and tenth-century Volga Bulgar trade**

**Evgeniy Kazakov**

*Tatarstan Academy of Sciences, Kazan*

Two waves of migration from regions where the Saltovo-Maiatskii culture was predominant had a major impact on Volga Bulgaria in the ninth and tenth centuries. Ibn Fadlan vividly describes the market in Bulgar during the first wave, a place where Turkic nomads came to trade, sable and fox furs arrived from beyond the Upper Kama region, and Rus merchants bartered grey squirrel pelts for want of sufficient coin.

The second wave of migrants to reach the Middle Volga after Sviatoslav's defeat of the Khazars in the 960s were sedentary and they brought developed forms of agriculture, handicrafts and commerce. Settlements appeared along the Volga and Kama, where many signs of trade have been found. There was constant and intensive exchange of goods with the Finno-Ugric population of north-eastern Europe, where the Bulgars had both seasonal and permanent outposts. Their traders covered a vast, thinly-populated area, but one rich in furs. They had two main routes: via the Upper Kama and Northern Dvina, and via the Upper Volga through the White Lake and Lake Kubenskoie. This state of affairs lasted until 1088, when the rising power of north-eastern Rus began to vie for control of the Great Volga trade route.

### **Beyond the Gate of the Turks: archaeology of the Aral Sea region in the late first millennium AD**

**Heinrich Härke and Irina Arzhantseva**

*University of Reading/Universität Tübingen and University of Moscow*

At the end of the first millennium AD, the Aral Sea region comprised two broad cultural zones: in the south the Khorezmian civilization on the Amu-Darya (Oxus), in the north the steppe empire of the Turkic Oghuz. They had markedly different economies, settlement patterns, religions, rituals and lifestyles, but they were also in contact and interacted through trade. The region has been intensively studied by archaeologists since the late 1930s, and this paper attempts to give a broad overview of the archaeological record of the late first millennium AD in order to put Ibn Fadlan's observations and comments in perspective. Particular attention will be paid to interaction of the two spheres in the joint river delta of Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya east of the Aral Sea, and to evidence for south-north trade routes across the Ustyurt Plateau west of the Aral Sea.

### The sources of tenth-century Arab geographers on the north: the 'Anonymous Relation' versus al-Jayhani

Jean-Charles Ducène

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If modern historiography attributes the oldest version of the 'Anonymous Relation' to Muḥammad ibn al-Jayhani, an internal critique of our medieval sources does not confirm this hypothesis. Firstly, the 'Anonymous Relation' is transmitted to us by Ibn Rusta, who was writing between 290/903 and 300/913. One has to set this against the fact that—although it is difficult to be more precise—al-Jayhani was certainly wazir in the period stretching from after 301/913–914 until 322/934. Furthermore, he collected his information for his book after 301/913–914 according to al-'Awfi. And there is no firmly datable evidence from the 'Relation' that would imply a redaction occurring in the first quarter of the tenth century. If al-Jayhani had access to the 'Relation', it was as a source. However, the majority of the medieval citations from al-Jayhani's works deal with Islamic countries or South-East Asia. We might therefore ask whether the 'Anonymous Relation' was even known to al-Jayhani.

### Other travellers' tales

Ian Wood

*University of Leeds*

Leaving aside the saga material, all of which is much later than the tenth century, travellers' tales from the post-Roman and Carolingian world tend to fall into two main categories. To some extent these divide into the realistic and the imaginary. Among the realistic the vast majority are hagiographical—apart from the two accounts of voyages included in the Alfredian *Orosius*, and Liudprand of Cremona's journey to Constantinople there are very few accounts of secular journeys. There are a handful of seventh- and eighth-century hagiographical descriptions of journeys to Rome, and indeed of pilgrimages to the Holy Land, but most of the tenth-century hagiographical journeys are related to mission (which include a number of visits to the eastern Slav lands), although John of Gorze's visit to Cordoba was diplomatic. In addition, however, there are purely imaginary journeys, of which the most notable is that which forms the basis of the *Cosmography of Æthicus Ister*. A subsection of the genre of imaginary journeys are those to the Other World. Of course the two categories overlap: the *Navigatio sancti Brendani* cannot be dismissed as entirely fanciful. But even first-hand accounts, like Wulfstan's account of his journey along the Baltic in the Alfredian *Orosius*, have their fabulous elements, while the missionaries shared the thought-world of some of the more imaginative writers.