

IBN FAḌLĀN AND THE RŪSIYYAH*

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Ibn Faḏlān's account of the caliphal embassy from Baghdad to the King of the Volga Bulghārs in the early fourth/tenth century is one of our principal, textual sources for the history, ethnogenesis and polity formation of a number of tribes and peoples who populated Inner Asia. Of especial significance is his description of a people whom he calls the Rūsiyyah. Attempts to identify this people have been the stuff of controversy for almost two centuries and have largely focused on how this description can be made to contribute to the Normanist Controversy (the principal, but by no means the only, controversy concerns the extent of Viking involvement in the creation of Russia). This article provides a fresh, annotated translation of Ibn Faḏlān's passage and considers a multiplicity of identities for the Rūsiyyah.

Ibn Faḏlān's account of his participation in the deputation sent by the Caliph al-Muqtadir in the year 921 A.D. to the King of the Bulghārs of the Volga, in response to his request for help, has proved to be an invaluable source of information for modern scholars interested in, among other subjects, the birth and formation of the Russian state, in the Viking involvement in northern and eastern Europe, in the Slavs and the Khazars. It has been analyzed and commented upon frequently and forms the substance of many observations on the study of the ethnography and sociology of the peoples concerned. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that, with a few very conspicuous exceptions, the majority of the scholars who refer to it, who base their observations upon it and who argue from it, are at best improperly familiar with classical Arabic. In the case of the people known as the Rūsiyyah, for example, two modern commentators have surveyed Ibn Faḏlān's *Kitāb*, or a portion of it, and have all too hastily identified the Rūs, variously, as the Vikings¹ and the Russians,² a scholarly commonplace among those involved

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¹ J. B. Simonsen, *Vikingerne ved Volga*, Wormianum: Højbjerg, 1981 (a Danish translation of the Rūsiyyah passage with annotation and a general introduction).

in the Normanist debate. Both authors give the impression that they are blissfully unaware that their identifications may be contentious or that the Rūs have now been the subject of heated debate for more than one and a half centuries, though in later years the balance has swung in favour of the Normanists. Pavel Dolukhanov, however, a leading authority on the archaeology of the period, in his *The Early Slavs: Eastern Europe from the Initial Settlement to the Kievan Rus*, Harlow, 1996, is the most sophisticated and persuasive exponent of an essentially anti-Normanist, pro-Slav stance. There are numerous translations of the work into European languages.³

It is the nature of the accuracy of Ibn Faḍlān's report which interests me in this study. I shall concentrate on a test case: the section of the *Kitāb* devoted to the Rūsiyyah. My interest in this passage was occasioned by the three and a half years which I spent as Senior Lecturer in Arabic at the Uni-

² P. G. Donini, *Arab Travelers and Geographers*, London, 1991. Donini offers a version based on T. Lewicki's translation into French: "Les rites funéraires païens des slaves occidentaux et des anciens Russes d'après les relations—remontant surtout au IX–Xe siècles—des voyageurs et des écrivains arabes," *Folia Orientalia* 5 (1963). Note that F. Donald Logan in his *The Vikings in History*, London, 1991, relies on Smyser's version (see following note), itself a translation of European (largely Togan's German and Canard's French) translations of the Arabic.

³ For a full bibliography of Russian and other works, see the very fine article by P. B. Golden, "Rūs," *Et*², viii, 618–29, and the French translation of the *Kitāb* by M. Canard, "La relation du voyage d'Ibn Fadlān chez les Bulgares de la Volga," *Annales de l'Institut d'Etudes Orientales de l'Université d'Alger* (1958): 41–116, not mentioned by Golden. Further, partial, versions (in English) are given by C. Waddy, in *Antiquity* (1934): 58 ff., E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, London, 1964, 272–73, J. Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age*, London, 1967, 111–13, 196–200, S. M. Stern and R. Pinder-Wilson, in P. Foote and D. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, London, 1970, 408–11. Other versions are A. S. Cook, "Ibn Faḍlān's Account of Scandinavian Merchants on the Volga," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 33 (1923): 54–63 (reprinted in A. R. Lewis, *The Islamic World and the West, A.D. 622–1492*, New York, 1970), A. F. Major, "Ship Burials in Scandinavian Lands and the Beliefs That Underlie Them," *Folklore* 35 (1924): 113–50 and H. M. Smyser, "Ibn Faḍlān's Account of the Rūs with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to Beowulf," in J. B. Bessinger and R. P. Creed (eds.), *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, New York, 1965, 92–119. Mention should be made of Harris Birkeland's Norwegian translation of A. Seippel's edition of Yāqūt and related texts (*Rerum Normannicorum Fontes Arabici*, Oslo, 1896): *Nordens historie i middelalderen etter arabiske kilder*, Oslo, 1954, 17–24, and Stig Wikander's Swedish translation, *Araber, Vikingar, Värangar*, Lund, 1978, 31–72.

versity of Oslo, where, among scholars interested in the Vikings, as indeed among scholars generally, it is widely assumed that the Rūs were Scandinavians of eastern Swedish origin and where there are those who cast aspersions upon Ibn Faḍlān's veracity as an observer.⁴ In a companion piece I have attempted to set the *Kitāb*, and this section in particular, within a wider textual context.⁵ Ibn Faḍlān's cultural chauvinism does not, however, in my opinion, necessitate a total rejection of his veridicality.

The translation and commentary of the following passage benefited from the observations of Kjellfrid Nome and Ulla Stang Dahl, students in the Arabic Storvag at Oslo (1995), with whom I read the work.

I am not convinced that by Rūs/Rūsīyyah our text means either the Vikings or the Russians specifically. I am neither a Normanist nor an anti-Normanist. The Arabic sources in general quite simply do not afford us enough clarity. The tendency among scholars is to presume that different Arab authors mean the same thing when they apply the names Rūs or Majūs to the people they describe.⁶ After a perusal of the sources, this strikes me as a perilous presumption. It is a distinct possibility that the medieval Arabs themselves were perplexed as to the exact identity of the Rūs, confusing, say, two different peoples.⁷ This, indeed, is the conclusion which Mel'nikova and Petrushkin (as reported by Dolukhanov, 190) draw, arguing that:

Arab writers who often used the word 'ar-rus' never attached to it any ethnic significance. They viewed the 'ar-rus' as warriors and merchants regardless of their ethnic

⁴ Accounts of this nature by foreigners, usually Muslims or Christians, like the eleventh century Adam of Bremen (on whom, see P.H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD 700–1100*, Routledge, 1996, 17–18, and his verdict, on page 23), should of course be put first in their own cultural context. Their manifest and latent chauvinism does not, however, of itself necessitate rejection of their validity, but rather an informed and cautious, albeit not unexamined, appraisal.

⁵ "Pyrrhic Scepticism and the Conquest of Disorder: Prolegomena to the Study of Ibn Faḍlān," in the proceedings of a conference held at Pazmany Peter University, Hungary, 1999 (forthcoming). There is an unavoidable degree of overlap between these two articles.

⁶ The importance of fire-worship among the Slavs features prominently in Arab accounts: P. B. Golden, "al-Ṣaḡāliba," *ET*², viii, 876–87. See further M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*, London, 1971, 151–70.

⁷ See the remarks of Golden, "al-Ṣaḡāliba," 872 and Canard on the ethnonym *ṣaḡālibah* which designates "toutes sortes de peuples du nord-est de l'Europe, Finnois, Bulgares, Burtās, Turcs (et même Germains)" (49).

affiliation. The same applies to Byzantine sources, which often mentioned ‘people calling themselves the Ross’ (Rhos), who in reality were groups of Scandinavians accomplishing various missions.

Although Mel’nikova and Petrushkin seem both to have their cake and to eat it (by evaluating unequally both sets of linguistic evidence—consistency on the part of the Greeks, inconsistency on the part of the Arabs), their assessment of the Arab sources is judicious. Each reference ought to be evaluated on its own merits. To avoid prejudicing the issue, I have therefore retained the transliterated form Rūs and Rūsiyyah and have generally referred to peoples and places in accordance with Ibn Faḍlān’s own usage.

In 1970 I. P. Šaskol’skij, in a survey of modern trends within the Normanist problem (“Recent Developments in the Normanist Controversy,” in *Varangian Problems, Scando Slavica Supplementum 1* [Copenhagen 1970, 21–38], hereafter *VP*), called for a reassessment and thorough scrutiny of “the Oriental (Arabic and Persian) sources on the history of ancient Rus” (31). This is now available in Golden’s thorough article in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* referred to above (n. 3). Golden (621) concludes the section on “The Origins of the Rūs” as follows:

The evidence is highly circumstantial at best. Given the complexities of their conjectured origins, it may, nonetheless, not be amiss to view the Rūs at this stage of their 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. The term was certainly associated with maritime and riverine traders and merchant-mercenaries/pirates of “Šaḳāliba” stock (Northern and Eastern European, Scandinavian, Slavic and Finnic).

Dolukhanov (197) characterizes the Kievan Rus’ as “a loose confederation of regional arenas of power with strong separatist trends”. 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 Rūs, each group of whom may have represented a variable level of ethnic assimilation. These are cautious appraisals⁸ according to which the Rūs appear as a more fluid social unit than recent scholarship has hitherto, often with its interests firmly vested in nationalist concerns, been willing to acknowledge. The Rūsiyyah in the passage which follows are a fine example of ethnic/social fluidity,

⁸ Sawyer (27) notes “that many Islamic writers only had vague, and often muddled ideas of the situation in Russia. They depended on information that had passed through many hands or mouths, and sometimes they caused further complications by their attempts to interpret earlier ‘authorities’ and make them fit.” He recognises that the Rūs were of Scandinavian origin (29).

combining, as Ibn Faḍlān portrays them (assuming, of course, that he has not himself confused two distinct peoples, either with or without the ethnonym Rūs), both essentially Varangian (costumary, among others) and Khazarian (regal) ethnic traits.⁹ It is quintessentially this fluidity that must be determined.

TRANSLATION

I saw the Rūsīyyah when they had arrived on their trading expedition¹⁰ and had disembarked at the River Ātil.¹¹ I have never seen more perfect physiques than theirs—they are like palm trees,¹² are fair and reddish,¹³ and do not wear the *qurṭaq* or the caftan. The man wears a cloak with which he covers one half of his body, leaving one of his arms uncovered.¹⁴ Every one of

⁹ The text used is S. Dahhān, *Risālat Ibn Faḍlān*, Damascus, 1959.

¹⁰ Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, considers the Vikings to have been pirates who extorted tribute and plundered goods, in which they subsequently traded. The furs and slaves which Ibn Faḍlān mentions were favourite forms of tribute which they would have coerced the local population into paying.

¹¹ Logan (197) comments that “near a bend in the Volga—close to modern Kazan—an international trading place existed at Bulgar, and here merchants of many nations traded.” On the nature of this disembarkation point see below note 28. Itil (in Ibn Faḍlān’s account, Ātil) was the capital of the Khazars on the Volga, near its confluence with the Caspian Sea.

¹² On the height of the Viking peoples, comparing evidence from Lund and Denmark, see E. Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark*, London, 1982, 18–19. I have used Roesdahl’s book with care, selecting only those features which seem to me to be relevant to the Vikings in general. Viking Denmark was, of course, different from Viking Sweden, where the Rūs, according to the traditional Normanist view, are supposed to have originated, and Viking Norway. Unlike Norway, however, but like eastern Sweden, it was more involved in the Baltic area. Indeed, Roesdahl’s book is a good indication of how varied, multifarious and fluent Viking society could be within one country. The Vikings owe much of their success to their malleability and readiness to adapt.

¹³ Golden, “al-Ṣaḳāliba,” notes “the close association, in the Islamic geographical literature, of a certain fair-haired, ruddy complexioned population type of Eurasia with the Slavs”.

¹⁴ “The appearance of male dress can for the most part only be reconstructed from pictures in Norway and Sweden; only a few exist in Denmark. As for centuries before and after the Viking Age, it consisted of trousers (wide or narrow), a shirt or

them carries an axe,¹⁵ a sword and a dagger¹⁶ and is never without all of that which we have mentioned. Their swords are of the Frankish variety, with broad, ridged blades.¹⁷ Each man, from the tip of his toes to his neck, is covered in dark-green lines,¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Around

a tunic, sometimes belted at the waist, and a cloak held together on the right shoulder by a large brooch, or ties" (Roesdahl, 128). See Smyser, 103. Ibn Faḍlān does not say that the men do *not* wear undergarments.

¹⁵ See A. N. Kirpičnikov, "Connections between Russia and Scandinavia in the 9th and 10th Centuries, As Illustrated by Weapon Finds," *VP*, 71–73, for a discussion of axes.

¹⁶ This may be the single-edged battle knife or scramasax, which in the tenth century was an "auxiliary weapon to the sword" (Kirpičnikov, *VP*, 70).

¹⁷ See Kirpičnikov, *VP*, 58–64, for a discussion of swords: "It was not Scandinavian but Frankish blades which were predominant in Rus" (64). Canard 118 translates *mushaṭṭabah* as "striées de lanures." The epithet is perhaps intended to capture the appearance of swords produced by the technique of pattern welding. "During this process a pattern would emerge along the central section, where the intertwined strips of steely and plain iron would show up in patterns of light and dark like eddying waves, coiling snakes, twigs, or sheaves of corn" (Simpson, 126). Ibn Faḍlān captures perfectly the dual nature of Viking merchant-warriors: "The crystallization of the two social groups, warriors and merchants, which were very often indivisible, formed a fundamental feature of the Scandinavian social pattern" (Dolukhanov, 174). "War in the Viking age was nothing but a continuation of foreign trade with the admixture of different means" (Dolukhanov, 176).

¹⁸ For tattoos, see Togan, 227–28. *Shajar* I take to have a similar meaning to its use by Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlah*, ed. W. Wright, Leiden, 1907, 333, describing the mosaics in the Church of the Antiochite in Palermo: *juduru-hā . . . qad ruṣṣi'at kullu-hā bi-fuṣūṣi l-dhahabi wa-kullilat bi-ashjāri l-fuṣūṣi l-khuḍri* (each of its walls . . . had been decorated with gold tesserae and crowned with lines of dark-green tesserae).

¹⁹ Note that Ibn Faḍlān does not describe how the women dress but concentrates on their accessories. He may intend the reader to assume that the women were clad in the same garments as the men, although this is unlikely. Compare his remarks with the following: "Female dress in its typical form . . . consisted of a shift or under-dress, its neck-slit sometimes closed by a small disc brooch. The over-dress, worn on top of this, consisted of a rectangular piece of cloth wound round the body and reaching the armpits; this was held up by shoulder-straps, fixed in front on each shoulder by an oval brooch." (Roesdahl, 126) See also Simpson, 65–66. Although Roesdahl describes Danish Vikings, the small disc brooch closing the neck-slit

their necks they wear bands of gold and silver.²⁰ Whenever a man's wealth reaches ten thousand dirhams, he has a band made for his wife; if it reaches twenty thousand dirhams, he has two bands made for her—for every ten thousand more, he gives another band to his wife. Sometimes one woman may wear many bands around her neck. The jewellery which they prize the most is the dark-green ceramic beads which they have aboard their boats²¹ and which they value very highly: they purchase beads for a dirham a piece and string them together as necklaces for their wives.²²

They are the filthiest of all Allāh's creatures: they do not clean themselves after excreting or urinating or wash themselves when in a state of ritual impurity (i.e., after coitus) and do not <even> wash their hands after food.²³

seems to be what Ibn Faḍlān refers to and confirms the MS reading ḥalqah instead of Yāqūt's widely countenanced ḥuqqah, restored by Dahhān (150). It should not be confused with the tortoise shell brooches used to hold the over-dress in place, as Canard, following Togan, and Smys(104) do. I have been unable to trace the detail of the dagger attached to the brooch but suggest that it describes the often "elaborate silver cloak-pin," such as the one found at Birka, which "was fastened by a cord tied to the small ring" (J. Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, London 1989, 117).

²⁰ These neckbands, usually strung with Thor's hammers as pendants, which Ibn Faḍlān does not mention, are well attested for the period: see Kirpičnikov, *VP*, 56–57.

²¹ This has long been recognised as a textual crux. Canard offers "des perles de verre vertes . . . de même fabrication que les objets en céramique . . . que l'on trouve sur leurs bateaux" and remarks that "these ceramic objects seem to have been intended for commerce" (118–19). Smyser (96), following Togan, gives, "their most prized ornaments are green glass beads (corals) of clay, which are found on the ships." The relative clause qualifies *al-khazari l-akhḍari* and not *min al-khazafi*. These beads are usually made of glass and are coloured (Roesdahl, 131). "Originating in the Mediterranean area . . . beads of this early type did not reach Ladoga from the Mediterranean, which was the centre of production, via Eastern Europe, but via the northern route, probably through the agency of the Northmen" (O. I. Davidan, "Contacts between Staraja Ladoga and Scandinavia," *VP*, 88–89). Ladoga has been excavated to reveal, among other commodities, "glass beads originating from the eastern Mediterranean area" (Dolukhanov, 184); see further pages 186 (Porost' on the Volkhov) and 187 (Kolopy Gorodok, upstream from Lake Ilmen).

²² Ibn Faḍlān may not mean that the women wear all this jewellery around their necks, for "many pendants . . . were suspended from a loop or a hole in the lower part of an oval or trefoil brooch rather than from a necklace" (Roesdahl, 132).

²³ According to Islamic practice, the use of bodily functions necessitates *wuḍū'* (ablution); *janābah* is major ritual impurity.

Indeed they are like asses that roam <in the fields>.

They arrive from their territory (*min baladi-him*) and moor their boats by the Ātil (a large river), building on its banks large wooden houses.²⁴ They

²⁴ It is improbable that they build these log huts every time they arrive. Various types of dwellings were used by the Vikings for mercantile purposes, especially, in this area, “farmsteads situated on trade-routes . . . used as market-places” (Dolukhanov, 180). It is unlikely to be a permanent, fortified trading station of the type discussed by D. M. Wilson (“East and West: A Comparison of Viking Settlement,” *VP*, 107–15: “The Vikings came to Russia as traders, . . . their object was to reach the great east-west trade route and the capital of the eastern Empire at Constantinople. To do this they had perforce to establish trading stations to defend themselves against possible attack” [112]). There were trading stations farther up river. Rørik’s Hill-Fort is one such location. Ibn Faḍlān seems to refer to the international trading mart in Bulghār territory, and these wooden houses may have been maintained for the Rūs by local traders. It is unfortunate that we cannot be more precise about the exact location and nature of these dwellings Ibn Faḍlān mentions. The transhumant character of the Bulghār settlement contrasts with the King’s wish to construct a fortress, which suggests plans to settle, perhaps actuated by burgeoning prosperity and probably influenced by Varangian example. Dolukhanov (180) remarks that the archaeologist Sedov “noted that non-agrarian, trade-and-craft settlements emerged in the seventh-eighth centuries in areas situated beyond the ‘limes,’ and populated by Germans, Slavs and Balts who had no urban traditions in classical antiquity. These settlements developed into proto-towns or *vics* (camps) or coastal trade factories. Although these centres had emerged in areas of dense agricultural population, their further evolution was closely related to commercial links, particularly in the Baltic area.” The characteristic features of the *vics*, trading camps, were: “a variable numerical composition of population, a changeable pattern of social roles, a lack of fortifications, at least at an initial stage, a variability of burial rite implying polyethnicity (sic), and a limited life-span by the ninth and early eleventh centuries” (Dolukhanov, 181). This tallies with what we know of the Khazar capital of Itil (see Koestler, 52–53), which also boasted a trade-and-craft suburb and “housed polyethnic (sic) bands of adventurers, who specialized in long-distance trade and military raids, as well as the craftsmen who served them” (Dolukhanov, 181), and of the late ninth-century Rørik’s Hill-Fort on the Volkhov river (Dolukhanov, 187), while the Bulghār encampment visited by the embassy is apparently in the early stages of *vic*-development, in the process of changing from an emporium or gateway-community (“administered trading settlements . . . mostly inhabited by alien merchants” [R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe*, London, 1989, 92], a feature of complex pre-market and pre-state societies) to an international market-place. Varangian military intervention in the East “greatly enhanced the development of already existing proto-urban centres, turning them into effective market-places and military-administrative strongholds” (Dolukhanov, 189).

gather in the one house in their tens and twenties, sometimes more, sometimes less. Each of them has a couch on which he sits. 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 indeed the merchant will come in to buy a slave-girl from one of them and he will chance upon him having intercourse with her, but <the Rūs> will not leave her alone until he has satisfied his urge. They cannot, of course, avoid washing their faces and their heads each day, which they do with the filthiest and most polluted water imaginable. I shall explain. Every day the slave-girl arrives in the morning with a large basin containing water, which she hands to her owner. He washes his hands and his face and his hair 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 this 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 friend. 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.²⁵

The moment their boats reach this dock²⁶ every one of them disembarks, carrying bread, meat, onions, milk and alcohol (*nabīdh*),²⁷ and goes to a tall piece of wood set up <in the ground>. This piece of wood has a face like the face of a man and is surrounded by small figurines behind which are long

If Ibn Faḍlān does mean that this disembarkation-point is the site of the market on the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers, the Varangian Rūs would have influenced the urbanisation of the area. The difference between Ibn Faḍlān's description of these dwellings and standard Viking houses may corroborate the suggestion that they are temporary stopping-places (see further Smyser, 104), although they have more in common with "authentically Slavic rectangular timber houses with an oven in the corner" (Dolukhanov, 184), indicating a further feature shared between Varangian and Slav.

²⁵For the significance of this passage, the details of which Ibn Faḍlān could scarcely himself have witnessed, see my article referred to earlier. Smyser (104) discusses the passage.

²⁶ This section, with its mention of the dock, which Canard (120) assumes is also the market-place, and of the cultic sanctuary, is further evidence of the nature of the settlement discussed above (footnote 24).

²⁷ By *nabīdh* Ibn Faḍlān may mean mead, made from fermented honey, and not beer as is widely supposed.

pieces of wood set up in the ground.²⁸ <When> he reaches the large figure, he prostrates himself before it and says, “Lord, I have come from a distant land, bringing so many slave-girls <priced at> such and such per head and so many sables <priced at> such and such per pelt.”²⁹ 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 *dīnārs* and *dirhams*³⁰ and who will buy from me whatever I want <to sell> without haggling over the price I fix.”³¹ Then he departs. If he has difficulty in selling <his goods> and he has to remain too many days, he returns with a second and third offering. If his wishes prove to be impossible he brings an offering to every single one of those figurines and seeks its intercession, saying, “These are the wives, daughters and sons of our Lord.”³² He goes up to each figurine in turn and questions it, begging its

²⁸ See Simpson, 182–83, for Viking idols, and Smyser, 105, for *tremenn*, wooden men.

²⁹ “The Rus traded principally in furs, . . . a constant, but probably small, marketing in slaves was part of the Rus commercial activity, although the Rus seem to have conducted this business privately and not in public markets” (Logan, 197). Logan gives no source for these assumptions, although he seems to echo Ibn Faḍlān.

³⁰ Rūs fondness for Islamic silver is attested by the numerous coin hoards discovered in Scandinavia, the Baltic area and in Ladoga, itself a gateway community. See Sawyer, 33–36, 123–29, and Hodges and Whitehouse, *passim*.

³¹ Compare the phrase *qūlī kayfa mā shītī* in a poem by Abū Nuwās (see J. E. Montgomery et al., “Revelry and Remorse,” *JAL* 25, no. 2 (July 1994): 133 (verse 10)).

³² This familial identification of the lesser gods and goddesses is somewhat problematic: it is unlikely (if this description refers to Rūs and not Slavic practice) that the main idol represents Odin, the leader of the tribe of deities known as Æsir, who was associated with the aristocracy and the warrior classes (see Simpson, 177–79 and Roesdahl, 161), but may perhaps be Frey, of the Vanir, a god “particularly associated with the Swedes” (Foote and Wilson, 389), a god generally held to be responsible for trade and shipping. His sister Freyja was the leader of the female divinities known as the Disir, “who had influence on fertility and daily prosperity” (Roesdahl, 162). A sacrifice of an ox or a bull was most appropriate to Frey, who seems also to have been thought of as a bull, while his sister was thought of as a cow. Cf. Turville-Petre, 255–56. Jones and Pennick (*A History of Pagan Europe*, London, 1995, 144) on the other hand, associate Frey with the horse and the pig. Dedications of such sites were “a move to establish friendship with its typical bargaining nature, maintained and balanced by gifts” (Foote and Wilson, 395). See further Foote and Wil-

intercession and grovelling before it. Sometimes business is good and he makes a quick sell, at which point he will say, “My Lord has satisfied my request, so I am required to recompense him.” He procures a number of sheep or cows and slaughters them, donating a portion of the meat to charity³³ and taking the rest and casting it before the large piece of wood and the small ones around it. He ties the heads of the cows or the sheep to that piece of wood set up in the ground.³⁴ At night, the dogs come and eat it all, but the man who has done all this will say, “My Lord is pleased with me and has eaten my offering.”³⁵

When one of them falls ill, they erect a tent away from them and cast him into it, giving him some bread and water. They do not come near him or speak to him, 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 bury him, though if he was a slave they leave him there as food for the dogs and the birds.³⁶

son, 399. This is presumably an item of information which Ibn Faḍlān derived from the interpreter.

³³ The verb used here is *taṣaddaqa*. The merchant probably held a feast of some sort. Ibn Faḍlān has interpreted the festive sharing of the meat in the light of Islamic ritual practice.

³⁴ Ibn Faḍlān has earlier mentioned a similar (funerary) practice among the Ghuzz, who eat the flesh of the horse but suspend its head, tail, feet and hide (Dahhān, 99). See Simpson, 186.

³⁵ The Scandinavian pagan religion was heavily anthropomorphic. A similar appeasement of, and thanksgiving to, a deity by means of offerings is described in the tenth century Byzantine *De Administrando Imperio*: “On the island of St. Gregory, we are told, ‘they perform their sacrifices because a gigantic oak tree stands there; and they sacrifice live cocks. Arrows, too, they peg in round about, and others bread and meat, or something of whatever each may have, as is their custom. They also throw lots regarding the cocks, whether to slaughter them, or to eat them as well, or to leave them alive.’ The nature of these rites has been disputed, and is still not clear: the fact that some of them are attested among the Scandinavians has led to the suggestion that we have here an account of Viking sacrifices. On the other hand, the description seems also to tally with our admittedly meagre knowledge of Slavonic pagan ritual.” (D. Obolensky, “The Byzantine Sources on the Scandinavians in Eastern Europe,” *VP*, 158) For the Viking worship of natural features, see Simpson, 180, Roesdahl, 162–63. On giving gifts to the gods, see Turville-Petre, 251–52. For Baltic/Slav tree worship, see Jones and Pennick, 174.

³⁶ This lack of proper burial for slaves and social inferiors is in keeping with

If they catch a thief or a bandit, they bring him to a large tree and tie a strong rope around his neck. They tie it to the tree and leave him hanging there until <the rope>³⁷ breaks, <rotted away> by exposure to the rain and the wind.³⁸

I was told that when their chieftains die, the least they do is to cremate them.³⁹ I was very keen to verify this, when I learned of the death of one of

Viking practice (see Roesdahl, 167–68). Ibn Faḍlān has earlier mentioned a similar practice of dealing with the sick among the Ghuzz, although the invalid among the Ghuzz seems to be able to rely on his slaves and retinue, while among the Rūs Ibn Faḍlān refers to total isolation (Dahhān, 99). Smyser (106) discusses other “repetitions” in the Rūs section, taken from the Ghuzz and Bulghār sections of the account, concluding that some of the details better fit a Scandinavian than a Slavic context. Presumably, ethnic influence was not exclusively exerted on the Rūs, but may also have worked in the reverse direction (Rūs → Slav/Bulghār).

³⁷ The verb *yataqatta‘u* is more appropriate to the rope than the corpse, which will, like the corpse of the slave in the last section, have been consumed by scavengers.

³⁸ Ibn Faḍlān refers to the standard judicial procedure of punishing thieves (Foote and Wilson, 381). He may also have witnessed human sacrifice by hanging to Odin, the god of the gallows (see Turville-Petre, 253–54, who suggests that human sacrifices may have been strung up after they had been ritually slaughtered). The suggestion of Turville-Petre that “sacrificial victims were criminals, and that the death penalty had a sacral meaning” (254) fits this context well. The use of the rope to throttle the slave-girl below is surely of this category: human sacrifice in honour of Odin. See also Simpson 185 and 186: “A scene on one of the Gotland stones . . . shows his symbol, the triple triangle, near a hanged man whom a swooping bird is about to attack, while a group of warriors holds another bird, which may also be destined to be sacrificed”.

³⁹ Both cremation and inhumation are attested among the Varangians. Modern scholarship, however, is unaware of the frequency of cremation when compared with interment, because “cremations leave little trace and are therefore less easily discovered and examined” (Roesdahl, 164). It is not clear whether elaborate cremations on this scale took place, because cremation leaves so little behind. Hence, on the basis of archaeological remains alone, one cannot maintain, as does Simpson (192) “that these customs can never have been so common in the Scandinavian homelands as the Arabs say they were in Russia, or they would have left more traces in the archaeological record; probably the fact that the Rus slave-traders had so many women readily available made it cheap for them to indulge in practices which were rare luxuries elsewhere.” Indeed, it is possible that cremation was especially favoured by the Rūs, as opposed to other Viking peoples. In this respect, the Arabic sources may be able to supplement our knowledge because the Northmen, among others, were often referred to as *majūs*, Magians, i.e., fire-worshippers, on account

their great men. They placed him in his grave (*qabr*) and erected a canopy⁴⁰ over it for ten days, until they had finished making and sewing his <funeral garments>.⁴¹

of the cremation of their dead. Note further, however, that the Eastern Slavs (*al-Ṣaqālibah*) are also called *majūs* because of their cremation of the dead. See A. Melvinger, “al-Maḍjūs,” *ET*², vi, 1120b. This would explain why Ibn Faḍlān’s account portrays the Rūs as combining two aspects of funerary ritual (boat grave and cremation). “In Scandinavia, where during the Iron Age, the dead were usually cremated and buried under mounds, a new type of ‘boat grave’ appeared in the sixth and seventh centuries. This new burial rite was complex: a boat was lowered into a large hole, the dead man was laid in it on a bed of grass accompanied by his weapons and domestic equipment; then a stallion and an old greyhound were laid beside the boat and killed. The boat was covered with planks, which included sledge-body side-rails, and covered with earth.” (Dolukhanov, 173–74) Ibn Faḍlān may of course privilege cremation to harmonize with Arab notions of both Rūs and Ṣaqālibah as fire-worshippers, although the Rūs may be adapting their own (military) funerary custom under the influence of the Slavs, who still cremated their dead and accorded a pre-eminent religious role to fire. This latter construction is borne out by investigation of Ladoga burial sites, which testifies to the chronological polyvalence of varied cultic practice. “A special Scandinavian cemetery (Plakun) is situated on the lower terrace of the right bank of the Volkhov, facing the settlement. This cemetery included no less than sixty barrows; seven (or eight) of which included boat graves with cremation. . . . It is generally acknowledged that this was a military cemetery, belonging to a small Viking detachment.” (Dolukhanov, 184; see further Logan, 205 on the Swedish character of boat-burials found at Ladoga and Sawyer 113.) Simonsen (46) thinks that Ibn Faḍlān was already “familiar with the various ceremonies which the Scandinavian Vikings performed on the occasion of a death.” The text clearly implies that Ibn Faḍlān learned about these rites during his mission.

⁴⁰ The Arabic is *wa-saqafū ‘alay-hi*. Such chambers have been discovered and they are constructed of wood. See Turville-Petre, plate 46: “Burial chamber found in the ship-grave of Gokstad, Norway. It was placed on board the ship.”

⁴¹ The text at this point gives the impression that Ibn Faḍlān did not have to travel to witness the funeral. Indeed the narrative anticipates itself in the detail of the self-sacrifice of the slave-girl. Ibn Faḍlān must relate this at this juncture, however, for his narrative of the funeral to have any coherence. It is clear from the next section, in the phrase *ḥaḍartu ilā l-nahri*, that this is not so, i.e., that, having learned of the funeral preparations from the Rūs whom he has just described, he travelled into Rūs territory to witness these events, perhaps as far as Ladoga or Rōrik’s Hill-Fort on the Volkhov, both of which settlements functioned as capitals of Rōrik’s newly fledged empire. By 862 A.D., so the *Russian Primary Chronicle* intimates, “on account of these Varangians the district of Novgorod became known as the land of Rus”

In the case of a poor man⁴² they build a small boat, place him inside and burn it. In the case of a rich man, they gather together his possessions and divide them into three, one third for his family, one third to use for <his funeral> garments,⁴³ and one third with which they purchase⁴⁴ alcohol which they drink on the day when his slave-girl kills herself⁴⁵ and is cremated together with her master.⁴⁶ (They are addicted to alcohol, which they drink night and day. Sometimes one of them dies with the cup still in his hand.)⁴⁷

When their chieftain dies, his family ask his slave-girls and slave-boys, “Who among you will die with him?” and some of them reply, “I shall.” Having said this, it becomes incumbent upon the person and it is impossible ever to turn back. Should that person try to, he is not permitted to do so. It is usually slave-girls who make this offer.

When that man whom I mentioned earlier died, they said to his slave-girls, “Who will die with him?” and one of them said, “I shall.” So they placed

(Logan, 185; see Dolukhanov, 194). On the historical worth of the *Chronicle*, see Sawyer, 20–21.

⁴² The text merely has *al-rajul al-faqīr*, but a poor chieftain may be intended, for it was apparently in Norway, not Sweden, that “the fashion for ship-burials spread rapidly among all social levels. . . . Over 1,000 have been found, both at home and in the settlements, though of course in many cases the ‘ship’ is only a small boat.” (Simpson, 192)

⁴³ Sumptuous raiment and furnishings have been found in the Mammen grave near Viborg and at Ladby on Fyn. See Roesdahl, 170–71 and fig. 36 on p. 127. These “splendid textiles . . . were unfortunately torn to bits when the grave was found in the nineteenth century (170). Some tapestries, such as that discovered in the Oseberg grave, have been reconstructed (Turville-Petre, plate 31).

⁴⁴ Adopting Yāqūt’s reading *yashtarūna* for *yunabbidhūna*.

⁴⁵ As noted by Simonsen (50), this detail is at variance with the account of the girl’s death at the hands of the “Angel of Death.” It may be a slip on the part of Ibn Faḍlān or a later copyist, and we should not read too much into it. It is even possible to gloss the phrase *taqtulu jāriyatu-hu nafsa-hā* as “sacrifices herself.”

⁴⁶ The custom of killing slaves and interring them as grave-goods was not uncommon among the Vikings (Roesdahl 24, 167). For other peoples, see Canard, 124–25.

⁴⁷ A fine death for a Viking to die: “Hardacnut died the death all good Vikings would desire, ‘standing at his drink’” (Wilson, *VP*, 108). “The Russian *Chronicle* states that Vladimir considered the religion of Islam—which he rejected, it is said, because ‘drinking is the joy of the Rus and we cannot live without this pleasure’” (Logan, 195).

two slave-girls⁴⁸ in charge of her to take care of her and accompany her wherever she went, even to the point of occasionally washing her feet with their own hands. They set about attending to the dead man, preparing his clothes for him and setting right all he needed. Every day the slave-girl would drink <alcohol> and would sing merrily and cheerfully.⁴⁹

On the day when he and the slave-girl were to be burned I arrived at the river where his ship was. To my surprise I discovered that it had been beached and that four planks of birch (*khadank*) and other types of wood had been erected for it. Around them wood had been placed in such a way as to resemble scaffolding (*anābīr*).⁵⁰ Then the ship was hauled and placed on top of this wood.⁵¹ They advanced, going to and fro <around the boat> uttering words which I did not understand, while he was still in his grave and had not been exhumed.

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. Then a crone arrived whom they called the “Angel of Death” and she spread on the couch the coverings we have mentioned. She is responsible for having his <garments> sewn up and putting him in order⁵² and it is she who kills the slave-girls. I myself saw her: a gloomy, corpulent woman, neither young nor old.⁵³

When they came to his grave, they removed the soil from the wood and then removed the wood, exhuming him <still dressed> in the *izār* in which

⁴⁸ I retain the translation “slave-girls” *pace* Canard (125), who gives “jeunes filles,” because they are the daughters of the “Angel of Death.” It is not clear, however, whether this is a symbolical or a uterine relationship. Turville-Petre persuasively suggests that the slave-girl thus “was treated as a princess” (273).

⁴⁹ Ibn Faḍlān evidently did not witness these preliminary proceedings, since they were over before he arrived.

⁵⁰ Stern and Pinder-Wilson render, “around it was arranged what looked like a large pile of wood” (408–9); Smyser, “around it (the ship) was made a structure like great ships’ tents out of wood” (98).

⁵¹ I.e., the four timbers which were to hold the keel in place. The shallow draught and low keel of Viking ships made them very suitable for portage. Ibn Faḍlān witnesses the placing of the ship upon the funeral pyre, *pace* Simpson, 197.

⁵² Stern and Pinder-Wilson translate, “She is in charge of embalming the dead man and preparing him” (409).

⁵³ A conjectural translation for a conjectural emendation, *jawān bīrah*. Sacrifices conducted by women are attested elsewhere (Turville-Petre, 261).

he had died. I could see that he had turned black because of the coldness of the ground. They had also placed alcohol, fruit and a pandora (*tunbūr*)⁵⁴ beside him in the grave, all of which they took out. Surprisingly, he had not begun to stink and only his colour had deteriorated. They clothed him in trousers, leggings (*rān*), boots, a *qurṭaq*, and a silk caftan with golden buttons,⁵⁵ and placed a silk *qalansuwwah* <fringed> with sable on his head. They carried him inside the pavilion⁵⁶ on the ship and laid him to rest on the quilt, propping him with cushions. Then they brought alcohol, fruit and herbs (*rayḥān*)⁵⁷ and placed them beside him. Next they brought bread, meat and onions, which they cast in front of him, a dog, which they cut in two and which they threw onto the ship, and all of his weaponry, which they placed beside him. They then brought two mounts, made them gallop until they began to sweat, cut them up into pieces and threw the flesh onto the ship.⁵⁸ They next fetched two cows, which they also cut up into pieces and threw on board, and a cock and a hen, which they slaughtered and cast onto it.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ See Smyser, 116, for the term “pandora.” The inclusion of a musical instrument at this stage of the ceremony has not been remarked on overmuch.

⁵⁵ The *qurṭaq* and the caftan are apparently ceremonial insignia, marks of the deceased’s honour, since they were not worn on a daily basis by the Rūs. Sawyer (114) comments that these Rūs “had been away from their homeland long enough to acquire alien habits of dress, for the silk tunic that was specially made for the dead *Rus* chieftain had buttons, which were not then used in Scandinavian costume.”

⁵⁶ There is no way of knowing whether this *qubbah* is a canopy constructed of wood or is a tent. There are parallels for the former in “the Gokstad and Oseberg ship-burials, where the corpse lies in a bed inside a little wooden shelter very like a tent” (Simpson, 197).

⁵⁷ “Perhaps these . . . ‘fragrant plants’ correspond to the bracken strewn over the floor of the grave chamber of the Sutton Hoo ship. . . . Moss and juniper bushes (were) used to line the grave chamber of the Tune ship.” (Smyser, 116) It is more likely that these herbs were somehow used to effect communication with the spirit-world.

⁵⁸ See Smyser’s note (117), “The sweating of the horses is evidently a relic of torturing sacrificial animals (or human beings) to enhance the value of the sacrifice to the god.” See further Jones and Pennick, 140: “guardians of his grave.”

⁵⁹ The presence of the livestock here leads Canard (129) and Simonsen (51) to conclude that the dead chieftain must have been settled in the area for quite some time. Viking trading ships, such as the Skuldelev ship apparently used in the Baltic area, were designed to carry such livestock (see Roesdahl 34–36), and so this feature of Ibn Faḍlān’s account cannot be used as evidence of settlement. Ca. 1015 A.D. Thietmar of Merseburg noted of Danish Viking rites that “they offered to their gods

Meanwhile, the slave-girl who wished to be killed was coming and going, entering one pavilion after another. The owner of the pavilion would have intercourse with her and say to her, “Tell your master that I have done this purely out of love for you.”

At the time of the evening prayer on Friday they brought the slave-girl to a thing that they had constructed, like a door-frame. She placed her feet on the hands of the men and was raised above that door-frame. She said something and they brought her down. Then they lifted her up a second time and she did what she had done the first time. They brought her down and then lifted her up a third time and she did what she had done on the first two occasions. They next handed her a hen. She cut off its head and threw it away. They took the hen and threw it on board the ship.⁶⁰

ninety-nine people and equal numbers of horses as well as dogs and cocks . . . as bloody sacrifices” (Roesdahl 162). Ibn Faḍlān here, presumably unfamiliar with Rūs conceptions of these rituals, does not distinguish between distinct rituals: blood sacrifices/sacral meals (the cows), sacrifices to establish contact with the spirit world (the cock and the hen) and the committal of grave goods to the deceased, generally a “selection of the deceased’s personal property, symbols of rank and necessities such as food” (Roesdahl, 166). See further *ibid.*, 165 (dogs, food and drink), 166 (slaves), 169 (riding gear, weaponry, horses [symbols of both death and fertility, associated with Frey], drinking vessels), 171 (the extravagant, aristocratic ship graves at Ladby and Hedeby). “These graves illustrate vividly concepts central to the traditional picture of Valhall. . . . What could be better to take to Valhall than your horse and weapons? Horses resplendent in their trappings were suitable for high-ranking men—even though they were not likely to have been used in battle—and presumably they also had to bear their masters to the Other World. Weapons were obviously necessary and the other grave-goods were no doubt useful both for the journey and for feasting on arrival.” (Roesdahl, 169–70) See further Turville-Petre, 271–72. In Denmark, on the other hand, those graves in which a slave accompanied his dead master are, surprisingly, comparatively Spartan (Roesdahl, 167).

⁶⁰ This action is reminiscent of the cock and hen sacrifice in the preceding section. It too must presumably be a way of communicating with the spirit world; communication between the dead chieftain and the spirit world had already been established. See also Roesdahl, 162, for the unusual contents of a female grave. Turville-Petre (273) suggests “that it is possible that birds of this kind symbolized rebirth.” The platform and chanting are also found in a thirteenth century work (*The Saga of Eirik the Red*)—treating of the eleventh century—in which a female shaman prophesies the future (Simpson, 189–90). This was the form of sorcery known as *sei Ær* (Foote and Wilson, 404). The Arabic *ashrafat ʿalā* suggests that she mounts this platform. Simpson herself thinks that “the wooden frame symbolizes a barrier

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 male-slaves. He summons me, so bring me to him.’”⁶¹ So they brought her to the ship and she removed two bracelets that she was wearing, handing them to the woman called the “Angel of Death,” the one who was to kill her. She also removed two anklets that she was wearing, handing them to the two slave-girls who had waited upon her: they were the daughters of the crone known as the “Angel of Death.” Then they lifted her onto the ship but did not bring her into the pavilion. The men came with their shields and sticks and handed her a cup of alcohol over which she chanted and then drank. The interpreter said to me, “Thereby she bids her female companions farewell.” She was handed another cup, which she

between this world and the Otherworld” and sees in the ritual killing of the hen “a vivid symbol of the renewed life beyond the barrier of death” (Simpson, 198). Logan wonders whether the door-frame is not “the ‘pillars’ used by the Viking priest-paterfamilias, and known to us from their use in Iceland and elsewhere” (199).

⁶¹ Her dead master is apparently already seated at the communal table, feasting, before the cremation ceremony stipulated by Odin. She is, of course, under the influence of a strong hallucinogenic. Her desire to be reunited with family and her master contradicts Roesdahl’s assertion that “apart from the Valkyries who fetched the dead warriors, there do not seem to have been any women in Valhall” (170). This and the discordant picture of the communal table at which the dead chief sits has led to doubts being cast on the identification of this paradise as Valhalla. The assertion that “Paradise is beautiful and verdant” may be a free rendering of the original into Arabic by the interpreter, although it is quite likely to be a cultural solecism on the part of Ibn Faḍlān, in view of the lush vegetation of the Muslim Paradise. This is not the only feature of the picture which is reminiscent of *al-Jannah*, for in Paradise the good Muslim will be reunited with his spouse(s), parents and children (see, e.g., Qurʾān 13:23), and great therein will be the symposiastic conviviality (see, e.g., Qurʾān 52:19–20). As with the merchant’s cultic sharing of meat, another Rūs religious practice has been clothed in a Muslim garb. It is interesting to remark that Ibn Faḍlān does not seem to be guilty of any cultural solecisms in his observations on both Ghuzz and Ṣaqlab (i.e., Bulghār) funerary rites. These passages do, however, suggest that Ibn Faḍlān wanted to understand what the ceremonies meant for the Rūs and was not content simply to impose an Islamicized lamina upon them.

took and chanted for a long time, while the crone urged her to drink it and to enter the pavilion in which her master lay.⁶² I saw that she was befuddled and wanted to enter the pavilion but she had <only> put her head into the pavilion <while her body remained outside it>.⁶³ The crone grabbed hold of her head and dragged her into the pavilion, entering it at the same time. The men began to bang their shields with the sticks so that her screams could not be heard and so terrify the other slave-girls, who would not, then, seek to die with their masters.⁶⁴

Six men entered the pavilion and all had intercourse with the slave-girl.⁶⁵ They laid her down beside 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 (*mukhālafan*) 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.⁶⁶

⁶² In all likelihood, the *nabīdh*, throughout translated as alcohol, was drugged (see Roesdahl, 19).

⁶³ Smyser (100 and 109) misunderstands this passage: “It is hard to see how the slave girl . . . got her head between the *qubba* and the side of the ship.”

⁶⁴ Canard (131) attributes this comment to the interpreter, but it is just as likely to be Ibn Faḍlān’s own construction of events, failing to see the ritual importance of the noise, intended to distract the attention of the spirit world, whose presence might mar the second ritual marriage inside the pavilion.

⁶⁵ The text does not support Canard’s view (132) that the crone left the pavilion whilst this funerary marriage was taking place. The cultic prominence of copulation with the slave-girl as well as the designation of the crone as the “Angel of Death” are perhaps suggestive of the cult of Frey. “The idol of Freyr in Sweden was said to be accompanied by a woman called his wife. The god and his priestess seem to form a divine pair” to the point that the “cults of death were linked with those of fertility.” (Torville-Petre, 261, 269) Simpson (200) notes, however, that “her title is quite a passable paraphrase of ‘Valkyrie’, ‘Chooser of the Slain,’ . . . it may mean that in the cult of Odin there were human priestesses who used the same titles as the supernatural warrior-goddesses who were his messengers.” The phrase “Angel of Death” would then represent another feature of Ibn Faḍlān’s Islamicization of the ceremony. Others have seen in this figure a Slavic influence.

⁶⁶ For the use of the rope, see above. It is not too fanciful to suggest that the “Angel of Death” here employs a technique similar to cutting the “blood-eagle,” a

Then the deceased's next of kin approached and took hold of a piece of wood and set fire to it. He walked backwards, with the back of his neck to the ship, his face to the people, with the lighted piece of wood in one hand and the other hand on his anus, being completely naked.⁶⁷ He ignited the wood that had been set up under the ship after they had placed the slave-girl whom they had killed beside her master. Then the people came forward with sticks and firewood. Each one carried a stick the end of which he had set fire to and which he threw on top of the wood. The wood caught fire, and then the ship, the pavilion, the man, the slave-girl and all it contained. A dreadful wind arose and the flames leapt higher and blazed fiercely.

One of the Rūsiyyah stood beside me and I heard him speaking to my interpreter. I quizzed him about what he had said, and he replied, "He said, 'You Arabs are a foolish lot!'" So I said, "Why is that?" and he replied, "Because you purposely take those who are dearest to you and whom you hold in highest esteem and throw them under the earth, where they are eaten by the earth, by vermin and by worms, whereas we burn them in the fire there and then, so that they enter Paradise immediately." Then he laughed loud and long. I quizzed him about that <i.e., the entry into Paradise> and he said, "Because of the love which my Lord feels for him. He has sent the wind to take him away within an hour."⁶⁸ Actually,

process of human sacrifice whereby "the ribs were cut from the back and the lungs drawn out" (Turville-Petre, 254–55). This form of slaughter was associated with Odin. Ibn Faḍlān is not likely to have witnessed this with his own eyes.

⁶⁷ This ritual nakedness was "a sign of mourning" (Simpson, 200), though it has also been proposed that the anus is covered to protect against infiltration by the spirits of the dead on the ship.

⁶⁸ The Rūs seem triply to ensure that the dead chieftain would enter Valhalla, as "some means of transport was a fairly fixed component in rich graves and this must mean that a journey to the Other World was envisaged for which conveyances were necessary or at least convenient" (Roesdahl, 170). Why jeopardize the chieftain's chances of Paradise by placing faith in meteorological phenomena, when you have ensured that he has adequate transport and appropriately splendid regalia to take him there? Is this another area in which Ibn Faḍlān has been misinformed by a non-Rūs interpreter? We know, for example, of "a passage in the *Poetic Edda* telling how Brynhild was laid in a covered wagon to be burnt on the pyre, and how afterwards she drove this wagon down the road to the Underworld" (Simpson, 193), but there is no mention of a wind. Compare this with Snorri Sturluson's comments: "Odin made

it took scarcely an hour for the ship, the firewood, the slave-girl and her master to be burnt to a fine ash.

They built something like a round hillock over the ship, which they had pulled out of the water, and placed in the middle of it a large piece of birch (*khadank*) on which they wrote the name of the man and the name of the King of the Rūs. Then they left.⁶⁹

He (Ibn Faḍlān) said: One of the customs of the King of the Rūs is that in his palace he keeps company with four hundred of his bravest and most trusted companions; they die when he dies and they offer their lives to protect him.⁷⁰ Each of them has a slave-girl who waits on him, washes his head and prepares his food and drink, and another with whom he has coitus. These four hundred <men> sit below his throne, which is huge and is studded with precious stones. On his throne there sit forty slave-girls who belong to his bed. Sometimes he has coitus with one of them in the presence of those companions whom we have mentioned. He does not come down from his throne. When he wants to satisfy an urge, he satisfies it in a salver. When he wants to ride, they bring his beast up to the

it a law that all dead men should be burnt, and their belongings laid with them on the pyre, and the ashes cast into the sea or buried in the ground. He said that in this way every man would come to Valhalla with whatever riches had been laid with him on the pyre. . . . Outstanding men should have a mound raised to their memory, and all others famous for manly deeds should have a memorial stone. . . . It was their belief that the higher the smoke rose in the air, the higher would be raised the man whose pyre it was, and the more goods were burnt with him, the richer he would be.” (Simpson, 193) There is no mention of a wind. However, Smyser (113) compares the burning of Beowulf, which features both smoke and wind.

⁶⁹ I.e., the burial site. The building of the barrow and the erection of a monument were standard Varangian burial practice. Ibn Faḍlān specifies, however, that the barrow was built over the site of the cremation, whereas “normally the burning took place on a different site from that where the ashes were to rest” (Simpson, 193). On page 200 Simpson, perhaps basing herself on Birkeland’s Norwegian translation, has given an incorrect rendering of the Arabic, while Logan (200) adds the phrase “who lived in a high place in their capital, which was called Kyawh (Kiev)”!

⁷⁰ This is the *hird*, the *comitatus* so typical of the Germanic kings and chieftains, whose members often conceived of themselves as a closed society, set apart from their fellow men. See the discussion in Foote and Wilson, 100–105, and Roesdahl, 25.

throne, whence he mounts it, and when he wants to dismount, he brings his beast <up to the throne> so that he can dismount there. He has a vicegerent who leads the army, fights against the enemy and stands in for him among his subjects.⁷¹

Foote and Wilson (408 and 411) make the following comment:

Ibn Fadlan . . . writes as an eyewitness, and although there is no reason to doubt his general accuracy, we must bear a number of factors in mind before generalizing on the basis of his account. It is the funeral of a rich and important man; it is a funeral by cremation; it took place in Russia (and many Russian scholars do not accept it as a description of a Scandinavian ceremony), where the Norsemen had been subject to foreign influence, perhaps especially from the Volga Turks; finally, some things in the account can only have been obtained by Ibn Fadlan through an interpreter. . . . Striking elements in this description, such as the ‘Angel of Death,’ the ritual intercourse, and the wary and naked kindler of the pyre, cannot be paralleled in Norse sources, and other items—the ‘door-frame’ object and the vision of paradise ‘beautiful and green’—are too vague to provide secure links. These things can be neither accepted nor rejected as widespread features of Norse burial rites, but there remain a good many other details that are reflected in our archaeological and

⁷¹ Golden, “Rūs” (622) remarks that “the sacral ruler described by Ibn Fadlān in 309/921–2 . . . certainly possessed many of the attributes of a holy Turkic *Ḳaḡhān*” (see the detailed discussion on p. 623). The presence of the *hird* makes it unlikely that “this notice is not a contamination from the notice on the *Khazar Ḳaḡhān*,” although such a remote possibility (remote because of the phrase *fa-amm̃a*) cannot be ruled out. See Smyser, 102–3. The sacral king, a concept which Koestler (92–93) considers a borrowing by the Rūs/Slavs (although it would be best to insist on the Slavic role) from the Khazars as their imperial role-models, lends credence to Dolukhanov’s querying the extent “of Scandinavian participation in the Kievan ruling élite and in their army” (195). The title of *khāqān* for the King of the Rūs is attested in 839 A.D., when “an embassy came from Constantinople to Emperor Louis the Pious at Ingelheim near Mainz . . . with . . . two men ‘who said that they call themselves “Rhos.”’ They had come as ambassadors from their king (*chaganus*)” (Logan, 186). The source is the contemporary *Annals of Saint Bertin*, a court chronicle. The sexual (mis)behaviour of the Rūs king is included, in a sense, by logical extension, since, according to the dictates of Islamic sexual propriety (and the chauvinism this engendered), the King is presumably setting an example for his subjects, or is at least merely acting in character with his subjects.

literary sources.⁷²

As for the identity of the people called Rūs in this account, there are a number of possibilities:

(i) they are Scandinavians, in particular the eastern Swedish tribe known by this name: a group of elite merchant-pirates operating out of Ladoga and Rørik's Hill-Fort;

(ii) they are an autochthonous people, the ethnic group known as the Rus' who took their name from the river Ros';

(iii) the account represents a conflation of at least two distinct ethnic groups, of eastern (Slavic) and northern (Scandinavian) provenance known to the Arabs indistinguishably as Rūs and influenced by ideas about the people known as the Majūs and the Ṣaqālibah;

(iv) the people described are a people in the process of ethnic, social and cultural adaptation and assimilation—the process whereby the Scandinavian Rūs became the Slavic Rus', having been exposed to the influence of the Volga Bulghārs and the Khazars;

(v) Ibn Faḍlān has mistakenly identified a group of Kievan chieftains on an expedition to extort tribute from the Slavs (usually in the form of marten furs) as merchant-warriors on a trading mission, basing his interpretation on his acquaintance with the Rūs as merchants;

(vi) it is erroneous to think of an ethnos with a distinct identity, as opposed to a multi-ethnic confederation based on common economic and political objectives (Golden's solution, given above), which confederation would have been subject to a preponderant Scandinavian influence;

(vii) the textual history of the *Kitāb*, taken in conjunction with the religious prejudice of the author (as evinced in the depiction of Rūs sexual customs and the Islamicization of Valhalla), is too problematical to permit any conclusions to be drawn from the work.

I hold that we are here given a picture of a people in the process of ethnic, social and cultural adaptation, assimilation and absorption, one typical of “the chameleon-like character of the Viking abroad, adapting himself to his surroundings where he saw something he thought was good; merely imposing his economic and administrative will on an area” (Wilson, *VP*, 111).⁷³

⁷² See further Smyser, 94.

⁷³ “The strength of the local population of European Russia and the international character of the trade was sufficient to destroy the character of the Scandinavian incomers” (Wilson, *VP*, 114), implying that they may have been resistant to such

This would account for the absence of any signs of cultural impact left by the Varangians, in the form of toponyms, nomenclature, and linguistic calques (see Dolukhanov, 190, and Logan, 203). As Dolukhanov (195) put it:

The Varangians were rapidly incorporated into the Slav élite, acquiring Slavic names, language and habits, and losing the remains of their Scandinavian identity.

To corroborate this point, I would like to refer to Martin Carver's recent theories concerning the composite (the word he uses is "poetic") nature of the burial at Sutton Hoo, a ceremonial performance which was expressive of the political, cultural and religious aspirations of Anglo-Saxon England, a declaration of regal alignment with pagan Scandinavia and rejection of Christian Kent.⁷⁴ We can no longer countenance those arguments which interpret the burial as a fixed, immutable event, for such contentions, by positing the burial ceremony as static and unchangeable, consider it determinative of ethnos rather than vice-versa.

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

The principal historical question is not whether the Rus were Scandinavians or Slavs, but, rather, how quickly these Scandinavian Rus became absorbed into Slavic life and culture. . . . In 839 the Rus were Swedes; in 1043 the Rus were Slavs. Sometime between 839 and 1043 two changes took place: one was the absorption of the Swedish Rus into the Slavic people among whom they settled, and the second was the extension of the term 'Rus' to apply to these Slavic peoples by whom the Swedes were absorbed. (Logan, 203)

Ibn Faḍlān's account sheds valuable light on the celerity of this process of assimilation and absorption, which was accomplished in the space of two centuries.⁷⁵

The preceding discussion has been largely, though not exclusively, philol-

change, which cannot be justified.

⁷⁴ Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* London, 1998.

⁷⁵ Logan (204) notes that "the Russian *Chronicle* under the years 881–82 states that, when Oleg became Prince of Kiev, 'the Varangians, Slavs, and others who accompanied him were called Rus.' The dating in the *Chronicle* here, as elsewhere, is open to question, but it seems clear that by the end of the ninth century there was already some assimilation."

ogical, focussed on a process of historical identification. There are, of course, other riches in Ibn Faḍlān's text. His observations on the importance of slaves in the Rūs world, as chattels and items of trade, suggest, in the context of master-slave relations depicted in the text, the reasons for the celerity of the process of cultural assimilation, from Viking to Slav. Ibn Faḍlān is himself fascinated by the artefacts of the Rūs; their trimetalism, clothing, domestic arrangements and the textiles which constituted the funerary pomp of the dead chieftain. He also provides useful observations on the (un)suitability of the Rūs as potential members of the Islamic polity, and stresses their very distinct alterity to a Muslim audience.

Perhaps, from an exclusively Arabic perspective, the most remarkable feature of this account of the Rūs is the impression it conveys of being essentially detached, indeed its 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.⁷⁶ It is a consciously restrained narrative, which does not balk at the opportunity to point to the cultural and religious superiority of Islam, but which is not drawn by this impulse into wildly extravagant tales, which often pruriently dwell on sexual improprieties. The account is not, with minor exceptions, a fusion of tall tales appropriate to a male assembly,⁷⁷ 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. The atmosphere of the all-male *majlis*, the salon, with its entertaining anecdotes and ribald improprieties, is lacking. Avoidance of such an atmosphere obtains throughout the *Kitāb*.

⁷⁶ Kovalevsky's theory, as explained by H. Ritter ("Zum Text von Ibn Faḍlān's Reisebericht," *ZDMG* 96 [1942]: 100), that the author's restraint was due to the miniscule importance of *adab* in the training of a *faqīh* is hardly tenable, but should be explained in terms of audience and patronage/commissioning as well as the rhetoric of eyewitness testimony.

⁷⁷ See G. R. Smith's discussion of the relevance to Arabic narrative literature of the male *majlis* in his contribution on Ibn al-Mujāwir in the H. T. Norris Festschrift (forthcoming).