
The Rus

Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, c. 922

From the eighth to tenth centuries AD, the Varangians, as Norsemen from Sweden and the Isle of Gotland were called, found portages between riverine routes that linked Scandinavia to Constantinople via the Dnieper River and Black Sea, and to Baghdad's hinterlands via the Volga River and Caspian Sea. By 830 AD, the Varangians had established themselves as the ruling class among the Slavic settlements from the southern Baltic coast to Kiev in a new polity known as the Rus. From these areas of settlement, Rus nobility ranged on voyages of trade and plunder, selling furs, wax, and slaves captured in northern Europe to heavily populated areas.

It was such trading raiders from the Rus that Ibn Fadlan met along the Volga in 922. Ahmad Ibn Fadlan chronicled the voyage of an embassy sent from Baghdad by the caliph Al-Muqtadir to the capital of a Finno-Ugric khanate located on the upper reaches of the Volga, a locale that had recently converted to Islam. At a time when large sections of central Asian Turkic populations were converting to Islam and being incorporated into the structure of the Islamic world, Ibn Fadlan recorded the mores and customs of the Rus through the eyes of a well-educated representative from the capital of Islamic civilization.

About Ibn Fadlan as a person we know almost nothing beyond personal and biographical details gleaned from his account of the caliph's mission to the king of the Volga Bulgars. The *Yaqut Geographic Dictionary* states that he was a scholar who started his life as the assistant chief scribe to the army general Muhammad ben Suleiman, who led wars that ranged from Egypt to China. Ibn Fadlan's interaction with peoples of the region newly annexed to the Islamic caliphates gave him many insights about the habits, customs, and laws of the Rus. This knowledge raised his position in the court of the caliph. As a confidant

Ibn Fadlan, Ahmad. 2005. "The Rus." From *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River*. Richard N. Frye, transl. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener. Pp. 63–71. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

in this court, Ibn Fadlan was then sent as a teacher of Islamic laws to the Bulgars. The journey, which started in 921 and lasted for three and a half years, took him and his fellow travelers from Baghdad to Bukhara and Kawarezm, south of the Aral Sea. They spent the winter in Jurjaniya, then crossed the Ural River to reach the Bulgar capital of Kazan. Throughout the journey, Ibn Fadlan recorded his observations on the Bulgars and their interactions with local Finnic tribes.

Ibn Fadlan's *Risalah* is considered the only extant firsthand account of the Eurasian steppe that appeared between Herodotus (fifth century BC) and the Catholic missions to the Mongols (thirteenth century AD). His work has been the subject of writings by Russian, Norwegian, German, Danish, English, and Arab authors and translators. The most important translation into English was published in 1923 after the discovery of his work in a Mashhad, Iran, library. His book and geography touches on nomads and conversion, rivalries between Byzantines and Iranians, merchants in inner Asia in pre-Islamic times, and the Byzantine and Sasanian trade with northern Russia.

The *Risalah* portrays Ibn Fadlan as a man educated in the Islamic sciences, a physician and man of law, and a sometime missionary. The work itself reveals Ibn Fadlan as a keen and fair observer. For instance, after his description of the ritual sacrifice and cremation of a young maiden he includes the voice of the Rus themselves as they criticize Arab customs: "They, the Arab communities, are stupid. . . . You go and cast into the earth the people whom you both love and honor most among men. Then the earth, creeping things, and worms devour them. We, however, let them burn for an instant and accordingly he enters into paradise at once in that very hour" (Ibn Fadlan 2005:70).

Ibn Fadlan sees the Varangians as they probably cannot see themselves—people in a liminal space, perpetual traders in an expatriate setting. He describes a wild and licentious people, tattooed paganism, and—for such water-focused people—much filth. He also records profligate sexuality and the lack of jealousy—all that is the inverse of urbanity and refinement. Particularly spectacular is probably the only eyewitness account of the burial rituals of a prominent chief, which included the sacrifice of a maiden who, after funerary rites of violence, sexuality, and fire, went to her death along with the honored leader.

. . .

I saw the Rusiya when they came hither on their trading voyages and had encamped by the river Itil. I have never seen people with a more developed bodily stature than they. They are as tall as date palms, blond and ruddy, so that they do not need to wear a tunic nor a cloak; rather the men among them wear a garment that only covers half of his body and leaves one of his hands free.

Each of them has an axe, a sword, and a knife with him, and all of these whom we have mentioned never let themselves be separated from their weapons. Their swords are broad bladed, provided with rills, and of the Frankish type. Each one of them has from the tip of his nails to the neck figures, trees, and other things, tattooed in dark green.

Each of the women has fastened upon the two breasts a brooch of iron, silver, copper, or gold, in weight and value according to the wealth of her husband. Each

brooch has a ring to which a knife is likewise fixed, and is hung upon the breast. Around the neck the women wear rings of gold and silver.

The man, if he possesses ten thousand *dirhams*, has a neck ring made for his wife. If he has twenty thousand in his possession, then he has two neck rings made for her. And so his wife receives another neck ring with the addition of each ten thousand *dirhams*. Accordingly it often happens that there are a number of neck rings upon the neck of one of them. They consider as the most highly prized ornaments the green glass beads made out of clay, which are formed on the polishing stone. They bargain for these beads, and buy a bead for a *dirham* a piece, and string them into necklaces for their women.

They are the dirtiest creatures of God. They have no shame in voiding their bowels and bladder, nor do they wash themselves when polluted by emission of semen, nor do they wash their hands after eating. They are then like asses who have gone astray.

They come from their own country, moor their boats on the strand of the Itil, which is a great river, and build on its banks large houses out of wood. In a house like this ten or twenty people, more or less, live together. Each of them has a couch whereupon he sits, and with them are fair maidens who are destined for sale to the merchants, and they may have intercourse with their girl while their comrades look on. At times a crowd of them may come together, and one does this in the presence of the others. It also happens that a merchant, who comes into the house to buy a girl from one of them, may find him in the very act of having intercourse with her, and he [the Rus] will not let her be until he has fulfilled his intention.

As a matter of duty they wash daily their faces and heads in a manner so dirty, and so unclean, as could possibly be imagined. Thus it is carried out. A slave girl brings each morning early a large vessel with water, and gives the vessel to her master, and he washes his hands and face and the hair of his head. He washes it and combs it with a comb into the bucket, then blows his nose and spits into the bucket. He holds back nothing impure, but rather lets it go into the water.

After he has done what was necessary, the girl takes the same vessel to the one who is nearest, and he does just as his neighbor had done. She carries the vessel from one to another, until all in the house have had a turn at it, and each of them has blown his nose, spat into, and washed his face and hair in the vessel.

When their boats come to this anchorage, each one of them goes ashore with bread, meat, onions, milk, and mead, and betakes himself to a tall wooden pole set upright, that has a face like a man. Around it are small images and behind these are long, tall poles driven into the earth. And he comes to the great image and prostrates himself before it. Then he says: "O my lord, I have come from a far country and have with me so many slave girls for such a price, and so many sable pelts," until he has enumerated all the goods which he has brought for sale. Then he continues: "I have brought this offering to Thee." Then he lays down what he had

brought before the wooden image and continues: "I wish that Thou shouldst provide me with a merchant who has many *dinars* and *dirhams*, and who would buy from me at the price I desire, and will raise no objection to me to aught what I may say." Then he departs.

If he has difficulties in his trading, and the days of his stay are prolonged, then he makes a second and a third offering. Should difficulties again arise over what he hopes to attain, he then brings a gift to each of these little figures, and begs them to intercede, saying: "These are the wives, daughters, and sons of our lord." And so he continues to approach each image, one after the other, and to beg them and implore them to intercede, and prays before them in abasement.

His dealings often go on more easily, and he sells everything he has brought with them. Then he says: "My lord has fulfilled my desire. I must repay Him." He gathers a number of sheep and oxen, slaughters them, gives away a part of the meat as alms, and brings the remainder and casts it before that great wooden image and before the little wooden images which stand around it. He hangs the heads of the cattle, or those of the sheep, on the poles, which are erected in the earth. In the night the dogs come and devour all, and he who has made this sacrifice says: "Verily my lord is content with me, and he has eaten up my gift."

If one of them falls ill, they erect a tent for him at a distance from themselves, and leave him there. They put beside him a little bread and water, do not approach him, and do not speak to him. Indeed what is still more, they do not visit him at all during all the days of his illness, especially if he is weak or if he is a slave. When he has recovered and gets up, he comes back to them. If, however, he dies, they cremate him. If he is a slave they let him be, and then the dogs and carrion fowl devour him. If they catch a thief or a robber, they lead him to a thick tree, throw a trusty rope around his neck and hang him to the tree, and he remains hanging until with the wind and the rain he falls to pieces.

They told me that they carry out many ceremonies when their chiefs die, the least whereof is the cremation, and it interested me to find out more about it. Finally the news was brought to me that a prominent man among them had died. They laid him in a grave, and covered it with a roof for ten days until they were through with the cutting out and sewing together of his garments. Thus it is; if [the dead] is poor they make a boat and place him in it and burn the boat. If he is a rich man, they gather his possessions together and divide them in three parts. One third remains for his family; with the second third they cut out garments for him, and with third part they brew mead for themselves, which they drink on the day when his slave girl kills herself and is cremated with her master. They drink the mead to insensibility, day and night. It often happens that one of them dies with his beaker in his hand.

When a high chief dies, his family says to his slave girls and servants: "Which one of you wishes to die with him?" Then one of them answers: "I." When he [or

she] has said this he is bound. He can in no way be allowed to withdraw his word. If he wishes it, it is not permitted. For the most part, this self-sacrifice is made by the maidens.

When the above-mentioned man had died, his relatives said to his slave girls: "Who will die with him?" Thereupon one of them answered: "I." Then the relations of the deceased charged two girls to watch her and go with her wherever she went. Indeed they even washed her feet with their own hands. The relatives of the deceased then began to occupy themselves with the preparations for the funeral ceremonies, to have the garments cut out for him, and to prepare whatever was necessary. The slave girl meanwhile drank all day long and sang joyfully, and enjoyed herself in view of the future.

When the day had come on which he and the maiden should be cremated, I put in an appearance at the river where his bark lay. I saw that this already had been hauled up on land. There were four props set up for the boat, of birch and other wood, and around the boat had been built a large structure like a large scaffold of wood. Then they hauled the ship further up, until it was placed inside this structure.

The people then began to move hither and thither, and to speak words that I did not understand, while he was still lying in his grave, out of which they had not taken him. Then they brought a couch, placed it on the ship, and covered it with draperies of Byzantine brocade, and also with pillows of Byzantine brocade.

Thereupon an old woman came, whom they call the angel of death, and spread the draperies mentioned over the couch. She had held the oversight over the sewing of the garments of the deceased and their completion. This old woman kills the girl. I saw that she was an old giantess, fat and grim to behold.

When they came to his grave, they removed the earth from the timbers and raised the timbers, drew him forth in the same garment in which he had died, and I saw how he had turned black from the cold earth. I also noted that they had put in his grave mead, fruits, and a kind of mandolin. They now took all of these out of the grave. Naught had changed in the deceased apart from the color of his skin. They then dressed him in stockings, trousers, boots, [and] a tunic and cape of brocade with gold buttons. They put a cap of brocade and sable pelts upon him and carried him into the tent that had been erected on the boat. Here they placed him upon the quilts, propped him up with cushions, brought mead, fruits, and flowers, and laid these beside him. They also brought bread, meat, and onions, and strewed them before him. Then they brought a dog, cleft it in two halves, and laid it in the boat. Thereupon they brought all his weapons and laid them by his side. Then they took two horses, drove them until they perspired, then cleft both of them in twain with a sword and laid their flesh in the boat. Then they brought two cows, cut them in two likewise and laid them in the boat. Then they brought a cock and a hen, killed them and threw both into the ship. The maiden who wished to be put to death went here and there, and entered each of the tents where the head of each

tent had intercourse with her saying: "Say to thy lord, I have done this out of love of thee."

On Friday in the afternoon they brought the maiden to a structure, which they had erected like a doorframe. She put both her feet on the palms of the men, and was lifted up onto this doorframe, and said her piece. Then they let her down again. Thereupon they put her up a second time. She repeated what she had done the first time, and then they let her down, and let her go up a third time. Again she did as she had done on the first two occasions. Then they gave her a hen. She cut off its head and cast it away. They took the hen and laid it in the boat. Thereupon I asked the interpreter what her actions meant. He said: "When they raised her up the first time, she said: 'Behold, I see my father and mother'; the second time she said: 'There I see all my deceased relatives sitting'; the third time she said: 'There I behold my lord sitting in paradise, and paradise is fair and green, and around him are men and servants. He calls me; bring me to him.'"

Then they led her to the boat. She took off the two armlets that she wore and gave them to the old woman whom they call the angel of death, who was to kill her. Then the slave girl took off two anklets that she had and gave them to the two maidens who had waited on her, and who were the daughters of the old woman known as the angel of death.

Then the people lifted her onto the boat, but did not yet let her go into the tent. Hereupon came men with shields and staves and gave her a bowl of mead, whereupon she sang and drank it. The interpreter said to me: "With this she is bidding goodbye to her friends." Then she was given another beaker. She took it and sang for a long time, while the old woman was urging her to finish the goblet, and to go into the tent where her lord lay.

I saw then how disturbed she was. She wished to go into the tent, but put her head between the tent and the side of the boat. Then the old woman took her by the head, made her go into the tent, and also entered with her.

Whereupon the men began to beat their shields with the staves so that her shrieks would not be heard, and the other maidens become terrified. Then six men went into the tent, and all had intercourse with the girl. Then they placed her beside her dead lord; two men seized her by the feet and two by the hands. Then the old woman placed a rope in which a bight had been made, and gave it to two of the men to pull at the two ends. Then the old woman came to her with a broad-bladed dagger and began to jab it into her ribs and pull it out again, and the two men strangled her until she was dead.

After they had laid the maiden they had killed beside her master, wood for kindling the fire was prepared. The closest relative of the deceased approached, and took a piece of wood, kindled it and then walked backwards to the boat, keeping his face turned toward the spectators, holding the burning brand in one hand, and placing his other on his anus. He was naked and walked backwards until he

reached the boat and set fire to the wood that had been prepared beneath the boat. Then the people came with kindling and other firewood, each having a brand burning at the end, and laid this stick in the pile of wood. Fire then spread through the wood and spread to the kindling, the boat, the man, the maiden, and everything that was in the boat. A strong and violent wind sprang up through which the flames were fanned and greatly enhanced.

A man of the Rusiya was standing beside me and I heard him talking to the interpreter, and I asked what the Rus had said to him. The interpreter answered that he said: "They, the Arab communities, are stupid." So I asked: "Why?" He said: "You go and cast into the earth the people whom you both love and honor most among men. Then the earth, creeping things, and worms devour them. We, however, let them burn for an instant, and accordingly he enters into paradise at once in that very hour," and he burst into immoderate laughter.

He said: "His Lord sent the wind for love of him, so that he may be snatched away in the course of an hour." In fact an hour had not passed when boat, wood, maiden, and lord had turned to ashes and dust of ashes. Then they built on the site of the boat that they had hauled up out of the stream something like a rounded mound. In the middle of this they erected a great beam of birch wood, and wrote upon it the name of the man and the name of the king of the Rus, whereupon they departed.

One of the customs of the king of the Rusiya is that with him in his palace he has four hundred men from among his most valiant and trusted men. They die when he dies and are killed for his sake. Each one has a slave girl who waits on him, washes his head, and prepares for him what he eats and drinks. He has another slave girl with whom he has intercourse. These four hundred sit under his throne, which is a large throne, studded with precious gems. Forty slave girls, who are intended for his bed, sit by him on his throne. He may have sexual intercourse with one of them in the presence of the companions whom we have mentioned. He does not come down from the throne. Whenever he wants to answer a call to nature, he does it in a basin. When he wishes to ride they bring him his horse to the throne, and he mounts it from the throne. When he wishes to dismount he brings the horse so that he dismounts from it onto the throne. He has a viceroy who leads his armies, attacks the foe, and represents him before his people.

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