

Volga Ethnic Relations from Ibn Fadlan's Perspective

Byzantium's interactions with surrounding ethnic groups help explain the resulting cultural complexities: numerous components, including political, social, economic, ideological, aesthetic and linguistic trends form from these encounters. Ibn Fadlan's tenth century account provides insight into the inhabitants of Bukhara and Khwarizm, and into the Oghuz, Pechenegs, Bashkirs, Bulgars, Rus, and Khazars. Towards a better understanding of Byzantine history, we shall examine highlights of Ibn Fadlan's journey from Baghdad to the Volga Bulgars.

"This is the Book (kitab) of Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-'Abbas ibn Rashid ibn Hammad client (mawla) of Muhammad ibn Sulayman, emissary of al-Muqtadir to the King of the Saqalibah": so begins Ibn Fadlan's invaluable account of his travels.¹ As a representative of the tenth century 'Abbasid kingdom, he spoke and wrote Arabic, and practiced Islam. He resided in Baghdad, though he was "probably not an Arab by birth"; his agent, Sulayman, is supposed to have "conquered Egypt from the Tulunids in 292/904".² Ibn Fadlan was "well educated in the Islamic sciences," and possibly a *faqih* (like a Doctor of Law).³ As emissary, Ibn Fadlan's responsibilities included representing the Caliph, reading letters allowed, presenting gifts, and supervising the jurists and teachers whom the caliph had sent in response to the Bulgar king's request.⁴ Besides Ibn Fadlan, the embassy included the 'Abbasid ambassador Nadhir al-Harami, the Sultan's emissary, presumably Bulgar Baris as-Saqlabi, and the Muslim Khazar envoy from the Bulgar king (who some suspect was a "political emigrant," representing the Muslim faction in Khazaria intent on overthrowing the Khazar king").⁵

The 'Abbasid Empire "was in regular contact with the Slav world, the Byzantine world, central Asia, the Far East and the Christian West".⁶ A diverse mid-ninth century Iraqi import list reveals Baghdad's trade relations with groups Ibn Fadlan would meet, including musk, furs, and sugar cane from "the land of Khwarizm," slaves and armor from "the land of the Khazars," and

from Armenia and Azerbaijan, felts, “packsaddles, carpets, fine mats, cordons for drawers, and wool”.⁷

Interest in Ibn Fadlan’s *kitab* has grown with developing discoveries and scholarship. Ibn Fadlan’s work is precious, as he “has left us virtually the only eyewitness account of the composition of peoples and forces in the Eurasian Steppe region between the time of Herodotus and the Dominican and Franciscan missions to the Mongols in the thirteenth century”.⁸ In addition to his distinctive subject matter, Ibn Fadlan’s work also belongs to a well-established genre, as “Arabs are the initiators of mediaeval geography...[superseding] the Romans and Byzantines”.⁹ However, his work differs from such geography, in that it establishes a fundamental space-time relationship, a distinctive trait of the *rihla*, an intermediary genre between geography and history.¹⁰ In 1923, the unique manuscript of Ibn Fadlan was discovered “in Mashhad...[as the last work in] a collection of four geographical works...compiled...in the second half of the tenth century”.¹¹ The Mashhad manuscript is neither complete (containing no account of the return journey) nor the original, since the *kitab* may have been “an official report addressed to the chancellery at Baghdad.”¹² The English translation utilized in this essay relies upon the Arabic edition of Ibn Fadlan’s *kitab* prepared by Syrian scholar Sami ad-Dahhan in 1959.¹³

Departing on Thursday, 11 Safar 309 AH/ 21 June 921 CE, the embassy of al-Muqtadir traveled along the Khurasan Road.¹⁴ When they reached Bukhara (in present day Uzbekistan), it was the capital of the Samanids and remained a center of Islamic culture and teaching into modern times, especially regarding the Muslims of Central Asia and the Volga region.¹⁵ Here they met with the Amir of Khurasan to obtain letters for safe passage and for an escort from the Turks.¹⁶ An agent involved in funding the mission is noted as a Christian; the Christians of Khwarizm were Greek Orthodox, demonstrating Byzantium’s wide influence.¹⁷

After many days of travelling only partial days due to the cold, they arrived in Khwarizm, and were received by the Samanid governor. There they struggled to obtain permission to enter the land of the Turks, receiving warnings of the presence of “a thousand tribes of unbelievers”.¹⁸ Though they eventually received permission, at least four of the group remained behind out of fear of entering the territory of the Turks; Ibn Fadlan continued with the ambassador, the ambassador’s brother-in-law and two servants.¹⁹

His observations of Khwarizm’s inhabitants included their “uncouth...speech and nature,” and their habits of praying but cursing the caliph “at the conclusion of every prayer”.²⁰ The travelers “purchased Turkish camels,” (the two-humped Central Asian or Bactrian camel) and had collapsible camel-skin boats made in preparation for later river crossing.²¹ In Jurjaniyah (the Arabic name for Guganj, a present day Turkmen town), they hired a guide, and set out in 309/922, entering the land of the Turks from Jit.²² Ibn Fadlan’s passing through Bukhara, Khwarizm, and Guganj are mentioned here only to provide context in the travel account. As presently Asian cities, their connections with Byzantium are vague, though they reveal something of the tenth century environment Ibn Fadlan encountered on his journey north.

Fifteen days later, they came to a tribe of Oghuz Turks (al-ghuzziyah). These nomads’ hair tents occupied the region “from the northern shores of the Aral Sea across the Ural River to the lands of the Khazars on the Volga”.²³ In Ibn Fadlan’s opinion, they lived a “miserable existence,” having no religion or authority outside of their chief men.²⁴ They sought the favor of others by reciting the *shahadah* (the Muslim testimony of faith, often translated as “There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God”).²⁵ Ibn Fadlan also mentions a tendency among the Oghuz to react to tribulation by looking towards the heavens, and saying, “God the One” to the sky; such rituals reportedly reflect the Mongolian shamanist tradition.²⁶ He found Turks prone to imitate Muslims; one receptive man admired Ibn Fadlan’s recitation of the Qur’an, asked questions, and

imitated Ibn Fadlan's prayers.²⁷ However, they were also suspicious and superstitious, forbidding ablutions under penalty of fine.²⁸

Characteristic of Ibn Fadlan, he moves from ideology to sanitary customs before exploring social organization. Coming from a culture comparatively strict about cleanliness, he disgustedly observes the absence of washing after activities in bathroom or bedroom. He notices the lack of veils or concealing clothes on women.²⁹ He found no evidence of fornication among the Oghuz, though he learned it was punishable by death by stretching between two trees.³⁰ Oghuz women were married to men by their guardians for the bride-price of camels, Khwarizmian gowns, riding animals, or other objects; this payment was required prior to marriage.³¹ Homosexuality was forbidden; Ibn Fadlan tells of a merchant of Khwarizm who seduced his host's beardless son while staying with a tribe of Oghuz. Both were sentenced to death, but the merchant paid them many sheep instead, and then left the land of the Turks.³²

"No one from among the Muslims is able to pass through their country until he befriends one of them," Ibn Fadlan writes.³³ Muslims stayed as houseguests with their acquaintances when they passed through Oghuz territory, bringing gifts for their hosts and their hosts' wives.³⁴ Oghuz hospitality included the provisions of a tent and sheep, according to rank, as well as mounts and money for guest merchants; Muslims slaughtered the sheep in their own manner (by cutting the throat in the name of God).³⁵ Turks apparently regarded Muslims as a clan or tribe, and so could demand the repayment of a loan from any Muslim, holding Muslims accountable for one another's conduct.³⁶

The first Oghuz chief Ibn Fadlan met, Yinal the Little, had converted to Islam, then later abjured the religion in order to remain chief.³⁷ He first refused and then permitted them passage, and they paid him in textiles and food.³⁸ The king's title, Yabghu, an early Iranian title, had been "used to designate close relatives of the Khaqan and usually implied an administrative duty".³⁹

Ibn Fadlan's party stayed with the army commander, "called Etrek ibn al-Qataghan," a name of Mongol origin.⁴⁰ As host, al-Qataghan provided tents, sheep, and horses to his guests.⁴¹ Ibn Fadlan offered gifts to their host, presenting money, musk, leather, and textiles to him, and a veil and ring to his wife; he also read a letter from the 'Abbasid ambassador, urging conversion to Islam.⁴² He presumably had vital multilingual skills, as "The complex of languages and cultures south of Novgorod was indeed such as to make it essential that a party of merchants...should have good interpreters with them".⁴³

Ibn Fadlan writes about a gathering of elders here to discuss the travelers' passage, and their incredulous remark: "'This is something we have never seen, nor heard of. No envoy of a caliph (sultan) has ever passed through our country in our time or in the time of our fathers".⁴⁴ They suspected the caliph of sending spies, with the object of raising an army against them, and they considered murdering, plundering, or exchanging the travelers for hostages from the Khazars.⁴⁵ In fact, Arab intelligence in the ninth and tenth centuries "had little military importance, but was of great interest in the economic and commercial expansion of the Arab world".⁴⁶ Finally released, Ibn Fadlan's party left gifts with their hosts and continued to the River Yaghandi, where they used the round, oracle-boats made of Turkish camel hides.⁴⁷ They crossed with the utmost caution, for fear of ambushing Bashkirs (used to denote both Bashkirs and Magyars, at this time occupying a region between the Kama and the Ural bounded on the north by Bulgars).⁴⁸

They found the Pechenegs, a Turkic people of dark brown complexion and shaven beards, encamped near water.⁴⁹ According to Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, most of them had been driven west of the Volga from an attack thirty years earlier by their former neighbors, the Oghuz and Khazars.⁵⁰ The Oghuz occupied the former Pecheneg territory, and the Pechenegs sought new territory. The Byzantines had been using "Magyars as an ally against the Bulgars, but after some immediate success the result was to provoke a Pecheneg intervention;" in this

way, the Pechenegs permanently expelled the Magyars (another Turkic people) from the Ukraine and acquired new territory.⁵¹ Some considered the presence of crosses and churches evidence that Romans had also once lived in this territory.⁵² The Byzantines responded by establishing a relationship with the Pechenegs, which they maintained throughout the tenth century.

Constantine Porphyrogenitus wrote in approximately 950 CE, “it is always greatly to the advantage of the emperor of the Romans to be minded to keep the peace with the nation of the Pechenegs,” since they were a constant threat to Byzantine Cherson on the Black Sea.⁵³ He recommends treaties and annual diplomatic missions to distribute presents in return for “sureties, that is, hostages and a diplomatic agent, who...shall enjoy all imperial benefits and gifts suitable for the emperor to bestow”.⁵⁴ He also notes the Pechenegs' relationship to the Rus, sometimes marching with them, and at other times raiding them.⁵⁵

Unlike the Ghuzziyah, Ibn Fadlan writes, they were poor; their sheep grazed in snow.⁵⁶ Ibn Fadlan's party stayed as their guests only one day, before crossing more rivers, halting warily in the country of a tribe of Bashkirs.⁵⁷

In Ibn Fadlan's opinion, the Bashkirs were the “most wicked of the Turks, the dirtiest...and the most audacious in the commission of murder,” beheading one another at will.⁵⁸ Though the name “Bashkort,” referring to Bashkirs, has been known since the ninth century, they may not have emerged “as a self-conscious ethnic group [until] the 16th c. from a mix of Tatar, Mongol, Volga Bulgaria, Oguz, Pechenegs, and Kypchak peoples”.⁵⁹ Bashkiria occupied “the area to the south-east of the Kama-Volga confluence and north of the Caspian Sea”.⁶⁰ Ibn Fadlan tells us one of them had accepted Islam and served the travelers.⁶¹ The men shaved their beards and ate lice. They also wore wooden phalluses, hung on themselves, worshipping and petitioning them; in answer to Ibn Fadlan's inquiry, one explained his devotion: “I came out of something similar to it, and I do not know any creator of myself other than it”.⁶² Some of them maintained they had twelve lords of nature, and a

superior “Lord who is in Heaven;” some worshipped snakes, others fish, and others cranes.⁶³ They explained to Ibn Fadlan that cranes had once frightened and routed their enemies in battle, and so they worshipped them.⁶⁴ Ibn Fadlan describes the misguided Bashkirs as “iniquitous;” when his party left them, they crossed many rivers before finally reaching the Saqalibah (Volga Bulgars) on 12 Muharram 310 AH/ 12 May 922 CE.⁶⁵

A “day and a night's journey” from their destination, the travelers were met by four kings, sent from the king of the Saqalibah.⁶⁶ The term “Saqalibah” referred generally to the peoples living East of Europe and north of the Muslim world, the Slavs, here denoting the Volga Bulgars.⁶⁷ The Turkic and Mongol system of four princes originates from the Central Asian shamanists’ sacred concept of four, manifesting itself also in the four cardinal directions and four quarters of the universe; similar systems of rule appear within the Rus and Khazar groups.⁶⁸ According to Whittow, “the Bulgars and Khazars were tribal confederations that had been created as a means for the Turkish qaghan to control the western steppes after their conquest in the second half of the sixth century...By 670 the Khazars...had broken the Bulgar confederation”.⁶⁹ The Bulgars split, some remaining as the Khazars’ subjects, some moving to the west, and others moving north.⁷⁰ The latter became the Volga Bulgars, first serving as vassals to the Khazars, and then establishing independence. Ibn Fadlan’s presence was to facilitate such independence.

The king, King Yiltawar, met them, prostrating with a Muslim greeting, ritually showering money on them from his sleeve, and then pitching tents for them.⁷¹ Four days later, the tribal leaders had been assembled. Ibn Fadlan dressed the king in a turban and black clothing, before meeting with him and his leaders. Ibn Fadlan read the caliph’s letter aloud, directing them to stand for the reading of the caliph’s letter; King Yiltawar and his leaders returned the Muslim responses to the greeting and conclusion of the letter.⁷²

The Bulghar king had accepted Islam in the early fourth (AH)/tenth (CE) century, a time of change resulting in the permanent incorporation of “large sections of the Central Asian Turkic populations...into the structure of the Islamic world” (In 349/960, 200,000 tents of Turks reportedly converted to Islam).⁷³ Turks formed a central part of the Dar al-Islam (Muslim Abode) from this period, leaving a final imprint on Islamic civilization that remained more or less intact through the early twentieth century. Though other universal religions “enjoyed great success among the Turks,” according to one scholar, “it was Islam in the final count which proved the most compatible with the Turkic ethnic mentality”.⁷⁴ This phenomena follows a larger trend of the ‘Abbasid period, in which “extensive Byzantization...came to a halt as Arabic and Persian influences gained the ascendancy in the evolution of Islamic civilizations,” spreading Islam, silver coins, and Arabic (replacing Greek and Persian by the early eighth century).⁷⁵ Regarding Byzantium, the Volga Bulgghars had been allies and enemies to the Romans since the fifth century.⁷⁶

The Bulghar king, Almish ibn Shilki Yiltawar, had originally requested the caliph “send someone who would instruct him in religion, acquaint him with the laws of Islam, build a mosque for him, and raise a pulpit (minbar) for him from which he would mention his name in his city and throughout his kingdom, and asked him to build a fortress in which he would defend himself against those kings who [were] at odds with him”.⁷⁷ Declaration of the caliph’s name in the *khutbah* (Muslim prayer session or sermon) proved invaluable to the ‘Abbasid ruler’s sovereignty over vast territories.

After Ibn Fadlan presented gifts of “perfume, clothing and pearls” to King Yiltawar and his wife, as well as a “robe of honor” to her, kinsmen showered money on the recipients.⁷⁸ About an hour later, they gathered in the king’s tent; the four sub-kings sat to the king’s right side, the king’s sons sat in front of him; Ibn Fadlan’s party was gestured to his left.⁷⁹ The king’s throne was

“covered with Greek brocade,” and the floor was covered in Armenian carpets; they all ate meat from individual tables and drank a non-toxicating honey beverage.⁸⁰ In order to sit in the king’s presence, his subjects kneeled.⁸¹ The Bulgars lived in tents as part of their semi-nomadic lifestyle (not a phase, but an enduring way of life, according to some scholars).⁸² These were yurts or linen tents, the king’s being the largest. Ibn Fadlan found only “temporary booths and tents in place of a town,” perhaps forming part of the Bulgar “international trading place” reportedly located near a bend in the Volga, where “the merchants of many nations traded”.⁸³ The encampment, according to Montgomery, was “in the early stages of *vic*-development, in the process of changing from an emporium or gateway-community...to an international market-place”.⁸⁴ The Bulgars were “encamped by a water that is called Khallajah,” Ibn Fadlan writes, at the site of a periodical market “in which much precious merchandise is sold”.⁸⁵ One may wonder if all the peoples mentioned by Ibn Fadlan, as well as representatives of Byzantium, would have had interactions in this market.

Ibn Fadlan recounts numerous lessons concerning Islamic laws. Aside from God, only the caliph should be praised from the *minbar* (not the king, as the Bulgars did previously, or Jesus, as the Christians did).⁸⁶ King Yiltawar chose to change his and his father’s names to Muslim names (Ja’far and ‘Abd Allah).⁸⁷ The king also challenged Ibn Fadlan, whose party had been unable to bring the necessary funds with them (due to difficulties in travel) to build a fortress.⁸⁸ Accusing Ibn Fadlan of incompetence, the king (Ja’far) saw no reason to accept religious advice from one who could not bring this needed defense against the Jewish Khazars.⁸⁹

Some of the Bulgars were merchants, traveling to the land of the Turks to acquire sheep, and obtaining sable and black fox furs from the Wisu (the Ves, a Finnish people located near Beloye Lake). In an anecdote regarding the discovery of a foreign giant, Ibn Fadlan quotes a Bulgar as saying, “I...wrote to the people of Wisu;” while some question Ibn Fadlan’s accuracy,

others think the Bulgars may have had their own writing system.⁹⁰ Such capabilities would increase the possibility of communications between the Bulgars and the Wisu, as well as their neighbors, assuming translation was available. In the case of death in Bulgar territory, Muslim visitors and men of Khwarizm were washed and buried; though the women remained silent, men wailed, and slaves mourned penitentially.⁹¹

On the River Atil, Ibn Fadlan saw the Rus (ar-Rusiyah) who were “on their trading missions,” and concluded, “I have never seen men more physically perfect than they”.⁹² He noticed these merchant-warriors’ blond hair, ruddy complexions, weapons, and tattoos.⁹³ Their women wore metal boxes and other jewelry, including metal necklaces (a status symbol and convenient alternative to their preferred currency, *dirhams* from the Muslim world) and ceramic beads (presumably amulets against the evil eye).⁹⁴

Though the identity of the Rus remains ambiguous, we know them in the tenth century as “Scandinavian traders in northern Russia”.⁹⁵ Montgomery quotes from Logan, “In 839 the Rus were Swedes; in 1043 the Rus were Slavs”.⁹⁶ The Swedish Rus becoming absorbed into the Slavic population and the use of ‘ar-Rus’ to apply to these Slavic peoples proceeded in an unknown manner. However, quoting the Russian *Chronicle* under the years 881-2, Montgomery writes, “the Varangians, Slavs, and others who accompanied [Oleg, Prince of Kiev] were called Rus,” implying some assimilation by the ninth century.⁹⁷

The men and their slave girls lived about ten or twenty per house; in this area, Scandinavians used “farmsteads situated on trade-routes...as market-places”.⁹⁸ Such settlements provided an example; added to prosperity and the Khazar threat, they may have influenced the Bulgars’ desire to construct a fortress.⁹⁹ The Rus requested success in their commercial endeavors from wooden deities they set up on shores. If unsuccessful, they returned to seek intercession from similar,

smaller wooden deities (the family members of the first god); if successful at market, they gave alms and sacrificed sheep or cattle to the deities.¹⁰⁰

Ibn Fadlan is probably best known for his account of the burial customs accompanying the death of a Rus chief. Sick people were isolated, and in case of death, only buried if they were rich (the poor left on the ground or in a floating boat).¹⁰¹ Rich chiefs remained in a grave for ten days while others prepared his burial garments. Though Ibn Fadlan includes many interesting details, the most significant for this essay is the bed prepared for the chief, covered “with quilted mattresses of Byzantine [(ar-Rumi)] brocade, as well as with cushions of Byzantine brocade”.¹⁰² This bed was prepared by a woman referred to as the angel of death, who sewed and took care of the brocade as part of her funerary duties.¹⁰³

Also of significance is Ibn Fadlan’s comment regarding the dead chief’s funerary garments, including “a brocaded caftan (khiftan) with gold buttons”.¹⁰⁴ According to one scholar, “these Rus ‘had been away from their homeland long enough to acquire alien habits of dress... which were not then used in Scandinavian costume’”.¹⁰⁵ One naturally wonders where such a custom originated. The specific term, *brocaded* caftan, may suggest Byzantine origins, but the answer remains unknown; regardless of the origin, buttons provide evidence of cultural exchange.

According to the Emperor in 950, Rus visitors to Byzantium generally came from Novgorod, Smolensk, and surrounding settlements, traveling by the river Dnieper.¹⁰⁶ While keeping “vigilant watch for the Pechenegs,” they conducted their slaves and merchandise across rivers and through foreign territory.¹⁰⁷ On the island of St. Gregory, they performed sacrifices in hopes of successful commercial endeavors, and then continued on to “Romania”.¹⁰⁸ Wintering in the Slavonic regions with “the rest of the Slavs who [were] tributaries of the Russians,” they continued this annual cycle, returning to Kiev when the ice thawed in April.¹⁰⁹

The Russians sought peaceful relations with the Pechenegs, as they bought from them animals not common to Russia: horned cattle, horses, and sheep.¹¹⁰ In addition, the Pechenegs controlled their borders and river crossings; the Rus were “quite unable to set out for wars,” or travel to Constantinople “either for war or for trade, unless they [were] at peace with the Pechenegs”.¹¹¹

The closing of Yaqut ibn-Abdallah’s thirteenth century rendition of Ibn Fadlan’s account of ar-Rusiyah includes the following: “This is what I have related from the Risalah of Ibn Fadlan, letter for letter. Upon him lies the responsibility for what he tells of, and God is most knowing concerning its truth. As for the present day, it is well known that their religion is the religion of Christianity”.¹¹² His remarks add some reliability to Ibn Fadlan’s work by reminding us that as a Muslim he would be held eternally responsible for his work. Also, we learn that the Rus later converted to Christianity; indeed, there was a Christian church in Kiev by 867.¹¹³ Byzantine influence remained “religious and cultural rather than economic, and the main markets for the produce of the Kiev region continued to be the Islamic east”.¹¹⁴ According to al-Marwazi of the twelfth century, the Rus had converted to Islam; the Islamic east also provided a strong religious and cultural influence on and around the Rus.¹¹⁵

Regarding Rus relations with Byzantium, Oleg of Kiev sent raiding expeditions south, perhaps arriving at Constantinople with a fleet in 907.¹¹⁶ Yet in the same year, and in 911, “he negotiated very favorable trade treaties...for his Rus merchants, who traded south in the Black Sea as far as Constantinople”.¹¹⁷ Succeeding Oleg, Igor’s policies too “required close contacts with both the Byzantine and the Moslem world” and were “based on a judicious use of force”.¹¹⁸ A new trade treaty was established in 945, differing from the previous two only in that it restricted their dealings

to “certain grades of fine silk cloth” and included protective provisions for Byzantium.¹¹⁹ In the later tenth century, the Rus were allies of Byzantium.¹²⁰

Commerce provided a primary link between Scandinavians and Muslims, although “there were hostile raids by the Rus in the lands of the Moslems;” for example, Oleg attacked Muslim cities on the Caspian Sea’s south shores in 910.¹²¹ The Bulgars and Khazars provided obstacles to the Rus aiming towards attacking Muslim lands until the eleventh century.¹²² The Rus traded primarily in furs and slaves, though they may have conducted the latter “business privately and not in public markets.”¹²³ The Rus were probably clients of the Khazars, and were increasingly influenced by them.¹²⁴ According to Ibn Khurdabdeh (c. 820-911), the Rus “even took camels and followed the route to Baghdad, where they sold their wares, assisted by European slaves, who interpreted for them;” some say it was Jewish Khazars, but they were still assisted by Europeans.¹²⁵

From excavations in Birka, we learn of the importance Muslim trade held for this Swedish settlement that “may have been the wealthiest of all the northern trading centers.”¹²⁶ Despite evidence of some trade with Dorestad in present day Holland and the Rhineland, “its main trade was with the east, particularly with Moslem traders whom Swedish merchants would meet among the Bulgars at the Volga Bend.”¹²⁷ In Birka, coins from the Muslim world appear “seven times more numerous than coins found from the west.”¹²⁸ Logan suggests that Birka’s eventual demise resulted “from neither plunder nor natural causes but occurred when its trade link with the Arabs were broken by Sviatoslav’s assault upon the Bulgars at the Volga Bend in about 965.”¹²⁹ Following the rule of Igor and his then his widow, Olga, her son Sviatoslav attacked the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars before attacking the Danubian Bulgars on the Byzantines’ behalf.¹³⁰ Sviatoslav’s son Vladimir later mended the contacts severed by his father.

In Gotland, where more than half the Viking age coins have been found in Scandinavia, archaeologists discovered “eighty per cent of the coins from Byzantium,” which are otherwise rare

in Scandinavia.¹³¹ Among these were “thirty-two hoards buried before c. 890 and containing more than 4000 coins, mostly Kufic (i.e., Arabic).”¹³² More than 80,000 Kufic coins have been found in Scandinavia.¹³³

Ibn Fadlan next writes of the Khazars, a Turkic khanate located between the Volga and Don rivers, which, “with the assistance of Byzantium, dominated the area until the eleventh century” defeat by the Kipchak Turks.¹³⁴

The king of the Khazars was called the Great Khagan, implying a claim to universal or supreme sovereignty.¹³⁵ The king of the Khazars had twenty-five wives, daughters of neighboring kings, in addition to concubines, all of whom resided in separate women’s quarters, each with a eunuch to guard her.¹³⁶ Ibn Fadlan reports that the king appeared “before the people [only] once every four months, and then at a distance,” while military and state affairs fell to his representative, Khaqan Beh.¹³⁷ This is the man, Ibn Fadlan writes, who led raids on neighboring groups and to whom “the neighboring kings submit[ted].”¹³⁸ The Khaqan Beh approached the throne of the Great Khaqan daily, barefoot and carrying a burning torch.¹³⁹ He and his representative (Kundar Khaqan), and his representative (Jawshighr) were the only ones ever permitted in the king’s presence.¹⁴⁰ Such dual kingship, according to McKeithen, “is a Turkic ruling institution of considerable antiquity.”¹⁴¹

The Khazar capital, Ibn Fadlan explains, straddled the river Atil (also Itil).¹⁴² This city included a “trade-and-craft suburb and ‘housed poli-ethnic (sic) bands of adventurers, who specialized in long-distance trade and military raids, as well as the craftsmen who served them.’”¹⁴³ The king and his companions resided on one side of the Itil, Ibn Fadlan says, while the other side housed the Muslims, headed by a Muslim servant of the Khazar king.¹⁴⁴ This man served as liaison and judge, holding responsibility for all Muslims living and traveling in Khazar territory.¹⁴⁵ Ibn Fadlan writes of a mosque in the Khazar city used every Friday. When news reached the Khazar king that a synagogue had been destroyed (location speculated as Baghdad, Iran, Babylonia, or

Khwarizm), “he ordered the minaret destroyed” and the *mu'adhmins* killed.¹⁴⁶ He would have destroyed the mosque, he said, but he feared the destruction of synagogues in the Muslim world.¹⁴⁷

Khazar military failures called for harsh punishment; every soldier returning in flight from a battle was put to death, and the leaders’ families, horses, goods, weapons, and houses were “given away as gifts to others...while they look[ed] on,” before the deserters were killed and displayed.¹⁴⁸ If the king was “being nice to them,” however, he made them stable boys, still humiliating them before the entire society.¹⁴⁹

Coming into contact in the seventh century, the Khazars and Byzantines had established a common alliance against the Persians in 626, together destroying the Sassanid Persian state after the Battle of Nineveh the following year.¹⁵⁰ Cultivation of Khazar relations formed a major component of Byzantine foreign policy from the seventh century onwards.¹⁵¹ Two marriage alliances followed in the eighth century.¹⁵² Some Byzantines had Khazar heritage, and Khazars served as bodyguards and soldiers in Byzantium.¹⁵³ Their last mutually cooperative endeavor, building a fortress, occurred in the 830s, and by the mid tenth century, Byzantine-Khazar relations had deteriorated, perhaps as a result of the Khazars’ conversion to Judaism and subsequently threatening status to Byzantine Christianity.¹⁵⁴

During the seventh and eighth centuries, Arabs and Khazars fought regularly.¹⁵⁵ Since the late eighth century, “the Khazars were forced by their Muslim neighbours to allow Muslim merchants access to the Don and Volga.”¹⁵⁶ The fur trade from the north, through the Volga Bulgars’ territory, and then throughout the Near East, began around the fifth century, though its climax “began in the late eighth century when either directly or indirectly virtually the whole of this network was under Khazar control.”¹⁵⁷ In approximately the eighth century, the Khazars converted to Judaism, in 737 the qaghan agreed to become a Muslim and subject to the caliph, and throughout the Khazars’ history, it contained Christian subjects.¹⁵⁸ In this way, the successful Khazars provide

an exceptional example of a diverse society in the Volga region. During the ninth and tenth centuries, the Khazar state had become “essentially a commercial empire,” wealthy, sedentary, with hired armies.¹⁵⁹ In alliance with the Oghuz Turks, Olga’s son Sviatoslav sacked the Khazars’ city and destroyed the qaghanate in the early 960s.¹⁶⁰

Finally, Arab-Byzantine relations are indirectly part of Ibn Fadlan’s account, as an integral component of the context of his travels, writing, and perhaps oral report. Diplomatic missions were common from both the ‘Abbasid and Byzantine courts. Within Byzantium, “there were no Arab settlements,” though there were “Byzantine deserters who for political or other reasons sought refuge in the caliphate.”¹⁶¹ Bishop Demetrianos was able to bring his fellow Cypriots back from Baghdad in the summer of 913 as a result of a letter to the caliph from the Byzantine Patriarchal Regent. This letter provides an intriguing political philosophy:

[...]there are two empires which together dominate the earth, that of the Saracens and that of the Romans, which scintillate like two immense stars in the celestial firmament. Because of this alone we should entertain relations of community and brotherhood and we should avoid hostility to each other under the pretext that we differ in our kind of life, in our customs, and in our religion.¹⁶²

Byzantine envoys to Baghdad occurred frequently, often including religious discussions and negotiations to exchange prisoners. During periods of peace (or truce), “diplomatic, cultural and commercial intercourse” took place.¹⁶³ Similarities between the two sides included ethical standards and a mutual respect for one another (and disrespect for the West), making possible some cooperative “artistic, cultural and scientific ventures.”¹⁶⁴

With the exception of Arab summer raids, land “warfare was intermittent between Greeks and Arabs in southeastern Anatolia,” until the Turks’ advance into Anatolia in the eleventh century.¹⁶⁵ Along the Anatolian border, frontier fighters (*akritai*) and fighters for the faith (*ghazis*)

challenged one another on behalf of the Byzantines and 'Abbasids, resulting in the exchange of land, plunder, and slaves.¹⁶⁶

The continued interactions between the Byzantine Empire and its neighbors resulted in an increasingly heterogeneous population, particularly in the military. About one century after Ibn Fadlan's departure from Baghdad, a Byzantine army, sent by Emperor Michael IV, disembarked at Sicily; it contained Russians, Bulgars, Greeks, and a small but formidable contingent of Normans and the *terrible* (the French word) Varangians.¹⁶⁷ Confirming the legendary character of these Northerners fighting for Byzantium in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Davidson writes, "Apart from the towering figure of Harald of Norway, a number of Scandinavians are mentioned in Icelandic prose sources as having served in Byzantium, and a number are said to have won honour in the Guard there."¹⁶⁸ In addition, Byzantine armies consisted generally of Western Europeans, steppe nomads, and Turks.

Ibn Fadlan lends a unique perspective to the peoples surrounding Byzantium when considering Byzantine interactions within the Volga area. His account offers some of the world's first ethnographic observation, with a host of details invaluable to students of history, and far too numerous to elucidate in this essay. Rather, by concentrating on six populations, the Ghuzz, Pechenegs, Bashkirs, Bulgars, Rus, and Khazars, a general picture emerges of complex relations between Byzantium's contemporaries. Such relations contributed to the complexities within Byzantium, forming the unifying foundations and challenging tensions throughout the history of the Byzantine Empire.

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- ² M. Canard, “*Ibn Fadlan*” *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. Ed. B. Lewis, et al. 10 vols. (Leiden,
Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1960) 759.
- ³ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 2.
- ⁴ M. Canard. op. cit., 759.
- ⁵ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 27.
- ⁶ Dominique Sourdel. *Medieval Islam*. Trans. J. Montgomery Watt. (London: Routledge & Kegan
Paul, 1983) 54.
- ⁷ Robert S. Lopez and Irving W. Raymond. *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*. (New
York: Columbia UP, 1955) 28,9.
- ⁸ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 3.
- ⁹ Francis Dvornik. *Origins of Intelligence Services: The Ancient Near East, Persia, Greece,
Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Muscovy*.
(New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1974) 254.
- ¹⁰ André Miquel. *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle*.
(Mouton: Mouton & Co, 1973) 134.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹² M. Canard. op. cit., 759.
- ¹³ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 22.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35,6.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

- ¹⁸ Ibid., 42.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 50.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 43.
- ²¹ Ibid., 48.
- ²² Ibid., 42,51.
- ²³ Ibid., 53.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 54.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 52,5.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 55.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 57.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 58.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 59.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 56.
- ³¹ Ibid., 57.
- ³² Ibid., 62.
- ³³ Ibid., 58.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 58.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 59.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 60.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 63.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 64.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 68.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 69.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 69.

- ⁴² Ibid., 70,1.
- ⁴³ H.R. Ellis Davidson. The Viking Road to Byzantium. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1976) 88.
- ⁴⁴ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 72.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 73.
- ⁴⁶ Francis Dvornik. op. cit., 258.
- ⁴⁷ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 74.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 75.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 77.
- ⁵⁰ Gy. Moravcsik ed. Constantine Porphyrogenitus De Administrando Imperio. Trans. R.J.H. Jenkins. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1967. Online. University of Washington. Internet. 24 Mar. 2002. Available <http://faculty.washington.edu/dwaugh/rus/texts/constp.html>.) 3,4.
- ⁵¹ Mark Whittow. The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 240.
- ⁵² Gy. Moravcsik. op. cit., 3.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 1,2.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 2.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 2.
- ⁵⁶ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 77.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 78,9.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 79.
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⁶⁰ Mark Whittow. op. cit., 236.

⁶¹ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 79.

⁶² Ibid., 80.

⁶³ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁹ Mark Whittow. op. cit., 222.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 222.

⁷¹ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 83.

⁷² Ibid., 84.

⁷³ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁵ Speros Vryonis, Jr. Byzantium: its internal history and relations with the Muslim world. (London:

Variorum Reprints, 1971) IX 223.

⁷⁶ Mark Whittow. op. cit., 272.

⁷⁷ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 25.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 86,7.

⁸¹ Ibid., 106.

⁸² Ibid., 106.

⁸³ F. Donald Logan. The Vikings in History. 1983. (London: HarperCollinsAcademic, 1991)

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⁸⁴ James E. Montgomery. "Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah." *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies III*

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⁸⁵ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 112.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁹¹ Ibid., 123,4.

⁹² Ibid., 127.

⁹³ Ibid., 127,8.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 128-30.

⁹⁵ H.R. Ellis Davidson. op. cit., 67.

⁹⁶ James E. Montgomery. op. cit., 6.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁸ James E. Montgomery. op. cit., 8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁰ James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 134.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 136.

- ¹⁰² Ibid., 140.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., 140.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 141.
- ¹⁰⁵ James E. Montgomery. op. cit., 10.
- ¹⁰⁶ Gy. Moravcsik. op. cit., 4.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 4.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 5,6.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 6.
- ¹¹⁰ Gy. Moravcsik. op. cit., 2.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid., 2.
- ¹¹² James E. McKeithen. op. cit., 153.
- ¹¹³ Geoffrey Barraclough, ed. The Times Atlas of World History. (London: Times Books Limited, 1978) 100.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid., 110.
- ¹¹⁵ Mark Whittow. op. cit., 235.
- ¹¹⁶ Archibald R. Lewis. The Northern Seas: Shipping and Commerce in Northern Europe A.K. 300-1100. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978) 275.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., 275.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid., 370,1.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid., 371.
- ¹²⁰ Mark Whittow. op. cit., 358.
- ¹²¹ F. Donald Logan. op. cit., 197; Archibald R. Lewis. op. cit., 275.

¹²² Archibald R. Lewis. *op. cit.*, 202.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹²⁴ Mark Whittow. *op. cit.*, 252.

¹²⁵ Archibald R. Lewis. *op. cit.*, 200.

¹²⁶ F. Donald Logan. *op. cit.*, 22.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³⁰ Archibald R. Lewis. *op. cit.*, 371.

¹³¹ F. Donald Logan. *op. cit.*, 181.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 181.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹³⁴ Geoffrey Barraclough. *op. cit.*, 108.

¹³⁵ James E. McKeithen. *op. cit.*, 153.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁴³ James E. Montgomery. *op. cit.*, 8.

¹⁴⁴ James E. McKeithen. *op. cit.*, 159.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

- ¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 160.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 160.
- ¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 158.
- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 158.
- ¹⁵⁰ Kevin Alan Brook. The Jews of Khazaria. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999) 166,7.
- ¹⁵¹ Mark Whittow. op. cit., 225.
- ¹⁵² Kevin Alan Brook. op. cit., 168,70.
- ¹⁵³ Ibid., 170.
- ¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 171.
- ¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 226.
- ¹⁵⁶ R.T. Farrell, ed. The Vikings. (London: Phillimore, 1982) 3.
- ¹⁵⁷ Mark Whittow. op. cit., 228.
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- ¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 259.
- ¹⁶¹ Francis Dvornik. op. cit., 236.
- ¹⁶² Ibid., 250.
- ¹⁶³ C.E. Bosworth. "Rum." The Encyclopedia of Islam. Ed. C.E. Bosworth, et al. 10 vols. (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1994) 603.
- ¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 604.
- ¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 603.
- ¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 603.
- ¹⁶⁷ Francesco Gabrieli, et al., eds. Histoire et civilisation de l'Islam en Europe: Arabes et Turcs en Occident du VI^e au XX^e siècle. (Vérone, Italy: Bordas, 1983) 92.

¹⁶⁸ H.R. Ellis Davidson. *op. cit.*, 230.