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***MUSLIMS ON THE VOLGA IN THE VIKING AGE.
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF IBN FADLAN,
EDS. J. SHEPARD, L. TREADWELL, I.B. TAURIS,
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This monograph attempts to address the latest research into relations between Muslims and other Eastern European nations, as conducted in both the West and Russia. This book is an excellent example of a well-prepared collective publication, in which the individual contributions complement each other to form a unified whole. This is not a common practice in the era of collective publications, such as those under the Brill label, where the thematic, geographical or chronological scope is often too broad. Thanks to the editors, however, the monograph includes the findings of researchers from influential Western centres, as well as Russian archaeologists and historians. Their contribution is significant, not least because they regularly conduct research on the sites of events depicted in Ibn Fadlan's account, and it would be difficult to write on this topic without considering their perspective.

Keywords: Volga Bulgaria, Ibn Fadlan, Muslim travellers, Slavic-Muslim relations, Slave Trade

This monograph attempts to address the latest research into relations between Muslims and other Eastern European nations, as conducted in both the West and Russia. One impetus for interpreting the narrative sources was a project by Polish researcher Marek Jankowiak (whose study is included in this volume), which aimed to draw conclusions about relations between Muslims and Nordic and Slavic countries. This was primarily with regard to the emergence of a large slave market based on dirhams found in hoards throughout northeastern Europe

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(Jankowiak, 2020: 355–373; 2021a: 53–76; 2021b: 105–131; 2021c: 161–181). This book is partly the result of a scholarly conference held in Oxford in March 2016 entitled *Lost in Translation? Ibn Fadlan and the Great Unwashed*. The texts for publication were collected in 2017. According to the editors, the six-year delay was primarily due to the challenging editorial conditions during the pandemic. The book comprises more than a dozen articles divided into six sections: an introduction (two chapters); the text and its context (five chapters); the circumstances of the journey (three chapters); Viking-Age Rus' (five chapters); Volga Bulgaria (three chapters); and a conclusion (one chapter). The appendices include chronological lists, alternative place names used in the book, a dictionary, and an index. A significant feature of the monograph is the set of maps of the regions mentioned in the texts included at the beginning, as well as the photographic material showing the archaeological sites discovered in the areas along the Muslim trade route. It is also worth noting that the book's cover is adorned with a painting by the Polish artist Henryk Siemiradzki, titled *The Funeral of the Rus' Leader*, which refers to an account by an Arab traveller (Khasianov, 2016: 49–58).

The introduction (pp. 3–14) emphasizes the distinctiveness of Ibn Fadlan's account and provides summaries of the key arguments of each chapter. This information is supplemented in the second article of the introduction, *Ibn Fadlan's Kitab: Text and Afterlife* by Viacheslav S. Kuleshov and Jonathan Shepard (pp. 15–27). This article discusses the possible reasons for writing the work and its dating in detail, as well as its history: Yaqut's discovery of it in Merv in the thirteenth century; its inclusion in his own narrative, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*; and its use in later works by Arab geographers of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The authors then discuss the circumstances surrounding the discovery of Ibn Fadlan's complete manuscript in Mashhad, Iran, in 1923 by Ahmed Zeki Velidi Togan, and subsequent editions and translations of the manuscript (Dziekan, 2023: 9–17). This 'second' introduction also provides a brief overview of the text itself, with the researchers focusing primarily on the construction of the narrative, ethnographic observations, and supernatural themes. This theme continues in the opening chapter of the second part of the book, *Where is the Real Ibn Fadlan? Editing and Translating the Kitab* (pp. 31–40) by James E. Montgomery, who prepared the latest critical edition of the text. After briefly discussing the problems associated with the work's development, the author of this chapter focuses on issues related to the manuscript's language. Following a more detailed analysis, he concluded that it differs from the classical Arabic typically used in works written for elites, instead resembling the informal language of Middle Arabic, which was used for reports written for central or local administrations. While this is an interesting clue as to the text's purpose, as the book notes, this aspect requires in-depth study. In the second chapter of this section, titled *From Kitab to Risala:*

The Long Shadow of Yaqut's Version of Ibn Fadlan's Account (pp. 41–65), Luke Treadwell – the book's co-editor with Jonathan Shepard – discusses issues related to the earliest surviving version of Ibn Fadlan's work, preserved in Yaqut. He points out several indications that could undermine the credibility of this travel account as a later forgery. In the text, *Other Arab geographers' sources on the north: The 'Anonymous Relation' and al-Jayhani* (pp. 67–81), Jean-Charles Ducène discusses the potential sources of Ibn Fadlan's knowledge. He notes certain similarities between Ibn Fadlan's text and geographical sources written by people who likely never visited the places he describes. This suggests that the author drew on the accumulated knowledge of his predecessors, creating within a specific conceptual and semantic framework. Subsequent chapters in this section of the monograph, by Walter Pohl (*Other ethnographies of the steppe*, pp. 83–103) and Ian Wood (*Other travelers' tales*, pp. 105–118), offer a comparative perspective on accounts of missions to the steppe or pagan peoples, such as the Western Slavs and Balts. These two studies highlight certain similarities between Muslim and Western relations: on the one hand, a certain contempt for barbarian and pagan peoples; and on the other, a sense of duty towards their conversion.

Part three begins with Hugh Kennedy's article, *The Abbasid Background* (pp. 121–131), which highlights fragments of the account that are not usually of interest to scholars. These fragments concern the portion of Ibn Fadlan's journey from Baghdad to lands subject to the Samanids. The article points to several phenomena that are basically mutually exclusive. For example, it describes a good network of roads that are still regularly maintained by the authorities, alongside a perceptible disintegration of central structures in favour of local groups of influence, represented by powerful noble families. The traveller emphasizes several times that, despite his mission and the caliph's support, he did not feel safe in lands nominally subject to Baghdad. In the second chapter of the third part, Nick Evans (*Ibn Fadlan and the Khazars: The Hidden Centre*, pp. 133–148) discusses the Khazars. Their political and military significance is evident in the source text. However, it is almost certain that Ibn Fadlan did not reside in the Khazar state. Even if he did, the information he provided about the Khazars was second-hand. These remarks are supplemented by the final article in this section of the monograph, written by Irina A. Arzhantseva, Heinrich Härke and Ekaterina A. Armarchuk and entitled *Beyond the Gate of the Turks: Archaeology around the Aral Sea* (pp. 149–174). This contains remarks on archaeological discoveries that confirm to some extent Ibn Fadlan's accounts of some of the areas he passed through, such as an increased prosperity due to the location on trade routes between Persia and the steppe regions, the preservation of pagan practices and the existence of places intended for the slave trade (Nagrodzka-Majchrzyk, 1994: 165–169).

The fourth part contains five chapters that discuss issues related to the functioning of Rus' under the rule of Viking families (cf. Michalski, 2012: 25–47; Lewicka-Rajewska, 2011: 163–175; Lewicka-Rajewska, 2003: 105–124; Abdallah, 2005: 169–182; Lewicki, 1952: 473–491). In the first chapter (*Ibn Fadlan and the Rituals of the Rus: Vikings on the Volga?*, pp. 177–197), Neil Price examines the fragments of accounts concerning funeral rites and recognizes their similarity to rituals practiced in Nordic communities until the seventh century. In *Viking-Age Markets and Emporia* (pp. 199–213), Søren M. Sindbæk explores the issue of the Abbasid influence on Viking-controlled trade routes and merchant customs. This influence can be inferred from archaeological discoveries, which are in many respects similar to the customs recorded by Ibn Fadlan. This strengthens the belief in the credibility of his account. Veronika Murasheva's article, *Rus, Routes, and Sites* (pp. 215–236), focuses on an archaeological site in Supruty on the Upa River in Tula Oblast. Until the ninth century, there was a Slavic settlement here, which was taken over by a group of men armed with Viking-style weapons. This centre dominated the Khazar-Slavic borderland. This unit, which included women, likely had the purpose of collecting tolls from the local population and passing merchant caravans. Traces of the arrival of another Viking group and an ensuing conflict were found at the site. According to the conclusions presented by the Russian researcher, the period during which Ibn Fadlan was supposedly in the territories of Rus' or Volga Bulgaria was a time of many changes: the emergence of new centres; the decline of others; internal struggles; and the activities of numerous Viking groups, who were often in competition with each other. In the following text, titled *Identities, Ethnicities, Cultures: Ibn Fadlan and the Rus on the Middle Volga*, pp. 237–251), Thorir Jonsson Hraundal revisits cultural issues, specifically funeral rites and practices relating to illness. This is based on an analysis of Ibn Fadlan's account and the likely adoption by the Rus of Turkic steppe customs, particularly with regard to the role of horses in these rites. Evidence of Eastern influences can be seen in many Viking emporia, both in Rus' and in Scandinavia itself, where examples of weapons, clothing, and equipment originating from nomadic peoples can be found. The final chapter of this section, *Rus and Other Northmen Under Non-Arabic Eyes* (pp. 253–276) by Jonathan Shepard, attempts to contextualize Ibn Fadlan's account alongside reports prepared for Alfred of Wessex and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus relating to the sources of Viking wealth and power.

Part five of the book is devoted to Volga Bulgaria. In the first chapter, Leonard Nedashkovsky (*What Was Volga Bulgaria?*, pp. 279–298) reviews archaeological materials that shed light on the history of this country. He indicates that these areas experienced a period of particular prosperity in terms of crafts, production, and trade immediately before the devastating Mongol conquest at the turn of the thirteenth century. Ibn Fadlan's references to the importance of trade for the deve-

lopment of the Volga state are confirmed by archaeological finds, particularly the numerous dirhams unearthed around the confluence of the Volga and the Kama. Large Bulgarian centres existed in Suwar and Biliar in this area (cf. Jończyk, Gołębiowska-Tobiasz, 2021: 10). At the same time, however, archaeology does not confirm the widespread dissemination of Muslim practices among the local population. It is worth bearing in mind that concerns have been raised about the limited scale of research to date, which is why arguments based on the lack of sources are difficult to accept as definitive and credible. Evgeniy P. Kazakov presents the importance of trade in the development of Volga Bulgaria in the next chapter (*Ninth- and Tenth-Century Volga Bulgar Trade*, pp. 299–313). These observations should be supplemented by Marek Jankowiak's concluding text, entitled *The Volga Bulgar imitative coinage* (pp. 315–357), which describes examples of imitative dirhams found in the Volga region. These coins are problematic because they are poorly made, as if the people carrying out the task had no idea what they represented. On the other hand, they are exact imitations – for example, they repeat the dates of the Samanid rule. Either way, they are considered evidence that the rulers of Volga Bulgaria were subject to Muslim cultural and religious influence. The sixth section of the monograph comprises the conclusions of the lectures presented by Jonathan Shepard (pp. 361–382), under the ambiguous title *Failure of a Mission?*, which discusses the circumstances surrounding the crossing through Muslim countries that were still formally subject to the caliph; the personal motives and circumstances of the envoy's and the author's lives; the envoy's and author's roles as diplomats; reflections on the geopolitical situation in the context of the Khazars; and the motif of the peoples of Gog and Magog appearing in the text. Finally, he attempts to answer the question of why and for whom Ibn Fadlan wrote his work, paying particular attention to the parts of the narrative in which the author explains his problems, lack of funding and diplomatic failures. This leads the researcher to suspect that it could have been a form of self-promotion, showing the diplomat's knowledge on the one hand, and on the other hand, explaining the objective difficulties in the context of the possible failure of his mission and presenting himself in the best possible light in his search for a new patron (the reason being the unstable situation at the Abbasid court). In this context, it is interesting to compare this with the descriptions of Byzantine missions by Liudprand of Cremona, where there is also a mixture of informational and personal elements.

This book is an excellent example of a well-prepared collective publication, in which the individual contributions complement each other to form a unified whole. This is not a common practice in the era of collective publications, such as those under the Brill label, where the thematic, geographical or chronological scope is often too broad. Thanks to the editors, however, the monograph includes the findings of researchers from influential Western centres, as well as Russian

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