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TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE WRITTEN TRAVEL NARRATIVE OF AHMAD
IBN FADLAN USEFUL FOR A HISTORIAN STUDYING THE 10TH CENTURY
VOLGA VIKINGS/RUS

Acknowledgement

First, I would like to thank a number of people for helping me discover my interest for both history as well as the extensive and amazing history of the Middle East. My interest for what is known as The Golden Age of Islam was first sparked by The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology's traveling exhibit "*Sultans of Science*". An amazing exhibit, showcasing some of the great inventions, breakthroughs and acknowledgements of past Middle Eastern scientists, explorers and historians. The exhibit was incredibly inspiring and my love for history is largely thanks to this. I would also like to thank former primary curator of "*Sultans of Science*" and the exhibit "*Ilm*" at The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology, Vidar Enebakk, for his enthusiasm and inspiration.

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Last, I want to thank my Mother and Grandmother. You guys are the brains behind the brain and the absolute best, I am very grateful to the both of you. Thank you!

Before reading this piece of literary analysis, I would like to encourage all readers to further read and research on the wonderful accomplishments of the world of early "Islamic" research and science. Today, a lot of great inventions, research and knowledge is based on the findings of researchers who lived within the extensive reaches of the old Islamic Caliphates. Stretching all the way from Constantinople to the far reaches of Spain, there was significant room for scientific breakthroughs and developments. Scientists such as Al-Kwarizmi, who is credited as one of the fathers of algebra, or cartographers such as Al-Masudi and Piri Reis who drew some of the first maps of the world, as well as so many more amazing scientists, explorers and historians, have contributed a lot to the modern world of science.

Finally, I would like to thank Ibn Fadlan, for both a wonderful and entertaining logbook, full of adventures and interesting historical sightings, as well as a great historical piece of work, which has inspired countless stories and cinematic adventures. His experiences are a prime example of a world which is much more intertwined than what we might originally think. I am grateful for having read his piece and encourage all to do so.

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Introduction

The written Rihla¹ of Ahmad ibn Fadlān ibn al-Abbās ibn Rašīd ibn Hammād, is a well critiqued and renowned 10th century travel account. Ibn Fadlān's *Risalah*² of his travels through the Middle Eastern deserts and the harsh Caucasus region³, is considered one of the first existing travel narratives of the Eurasian steppe, and the only firsthand account of a Viking burial by the eastern Volga river bay.⁴ Hence making the source a potentially valuable historic document.

His travel narrative is one of many at the time. However, it is rather unique, as it is far more detailed than any other and focuses mainly on the inhabitants he meets. Ibn Fadlan recorded the mores and customs of the Rus as an Ambassador of an envoy from the capital of Islamic, Baghdad. He gives a detailed account of the populations that live in the region. He describes their trade customs, clothing, diets and general living. For example, he elaborates on the Khazars, a semi-nomadic, Turkic speaking people of the Caspian steppes⁵, as well as the manners and customs of the Volga Rus.⁶

This essay will evaluate if Ibn Fadlan's travel narrative can be useful for a Historian studying the 10th century Volga Vikings/Rus. Several translations will be analyzed such as; James E. Montgomery's "*Mission to the Volga*" (2017), Blake, Robert P. and Richard Frye's "*Notes on the Risalah of Ibn Fadlan*" (1949), as well significant primary sources such as "*Yaquṭs Quotations from the Book of Ibn Fadlan*"⁷ and the "*Mu'jam al-Buldan*"⁸.

¹ Journal or account

² Journal or account

³ Rood, T. (2006). Herodotus and foreign lands. *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, 290–305. doi: 10.1017/ccol052183001x.020

⁴ Tjønn, H. (2015). *Russland blir til* (1st ed., Vol. 1). Princeton: Markus Wiener, Page 40

⁵ *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 2 (1988)

⁶ Riasanovsky, Alexander, et al (1963) *Readings in Russian History* 3vv, page 11-12

⁷ Yāqūt's Quotations From The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. (n.d.). *Mission to the Volga*, 41–62. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁸ Yaquṭ Al- Hamawī, The dictionary of countries, (1179)., World digital library (1905). [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://dl.wdl.org/7444/service/7444.pdf>

The usefulness of Ibn Fadlan's travel narrative will be analyzed based on who Ibn Fadlan was, by evaluating pre-determined biases as a result of his foreign culture, and what his motives may have been. The written account also consists of part oral dictation. Other sources regarding the Vikings/Rus in the 10th century contains similarities to Ibn Fadlan's account. This may help us determine its usefulness. The written travel narrative is an important source, as it shows us how much the Islamic world in the early 10th century valued knowledge and understanding. It is also a highly unique historical work, as it describes the world from the view of an Islamic Ambassador, as an eyewitness to a Viking ship burial.

Chapter One: IBN FADLAN'S BACKGROUND AND MISSION

Due to the little knowledge we have of Ibn Fadlan's background and personal information, correctly interpreting the account may be difficult. However, there are some precautionary assumptions we can take from reading extracts of his narrative. We know that his account reads like a diary, reporting what he saw, heard or experienced, plus remarks about his observations.⁹ His style is straightforward, however his descriptions may contain some exaggeration.¹⁰ We also know that Ibn Fadlan was one of many who were chosen as part of a larger Islamic envoy¹¹ which was commissioned by the ruler of the Abbasid Caliphate, Abu'l-Faḍl Ja'far ibn Ahmad al-Mu'taḍid (921). The voyage was sent from Baghdad, to the capital of a Finno-Ugric Khanate¹². It was located on the upper reaches of the Volga, a place that had recently converted to Islam. Ibn Fadlan's role in the envoy seems to have been of considerable responsibility and he communicated directly with the ruler of the Volga Bulgars on matters related to the envoy's official task.¹³

We know strictly nothing regarding Ibn Fadlan as an individual beyond personal and biographical details extracted from his account. The Yaquṭ geographical encyclopedia, the "*Mu'jam al-Buldan*" written by Muslim Scholar Yaquṭ al-Hamawī¹⁴(1179), contains a collection of works by late Islamic travelers and includes Ibn Fadlan's account. Yaquṭ al-Hamawī mentions Ibn Fadlan in certain extracts and interprets and elaborates about him as a person. Throughout the narrative, we gradually get more acquainted with Ibn Fadlan.

⁹ Richard Frye, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*, 2005, page 13

¹⁰ Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 41. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

¹¹ Richard Frye, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*, 2005, page 12

¹² Richard Frye, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*, 2005, page 44

¹³ Tim Severin, *Forward on Ibn Fadlan's Mission to the Volga*, 2017, page 14

¹⁴ Yaquṭ Al-Hamawī, *The dictionary of countries*, (1179)., World digital library (1905). [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://dl.wdl.org/7444/service/7444.pdf>

We get to know more about Ibn Fadlan when he encounters a semi-nomadic Turkish tribe.¹⁵ He concludes that the sheep of the Turks were fat in the winter because they ate snow, only to lose weight in the summer because they ate grass.¹⁶ Apparently, he was unaware that in spring the flocks were shorn off their wool and therefore seem thinner. This might imply that Ibn Fadlan lacks understanding of local ways of life, such as farming, thus incorrectly interpreting this phenomenon.¹⁷ From this lack of understanding, we can argue that when using him as a source for the Volga Vikings, his statements should not be taken directly at face value, at least not those that require significant background knowledge. This is also relevant for other depictions in his narrative, which could imply that the source lacks a certain validity, as aspects which Ibn Fadlan himself interprets may not be fully correct. Despite this lack of background knowledge, when he encounters the Volga Vikings, as well as when he describes the scenery and people, one can see that he does not stop to dwell on the reason behind the different circumstances¹⁸. He acts as a fly on the wall describing the different events as they happen¹⁹; “...*When one of them (Rus) falls ill, they pitch a tent far away and lay him downside, with some bread and water. They do not approach or speak to him. Indeed, they have no contact with him for as long as he is ill.*”²⁰ Here, Ibn Fadlan is simply describing the way the Rus treat the sick, and not personally interpreting anything, as far as we can tell.²¹

One can argue that Ibn Fadlan’s “uncensored” assessments add to the value of his narrative. For him, there is no reason to be polite nor lie. However, his own personal statements may still be biased.²² We do not know for whom his account was compiled, or for what reason. However, it is safe to say that he did not imagine that his audience would include Turkish tribesmen who

¹⁵Tim Severin, Forward on Ibn Fadlan’s Mission to the Volga, 2017, page 13

¹⁶Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page 58. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

¹⁷Tim Severin, Forward on Ibn Fadlan’s Mission to the Volga, 2017, page 14

¹⁸Richard Frye, Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia, 2005, page 20

¹⁹Richard Frye, Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia, 2005, page 63

²⁰Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 57. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

²¹J. E. Montgomery Mission to the Volga, (2000), (page. 32)

²²Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 59. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

would take offense of his writings. Ibn Fadlan was free to express his own opinions, while also enhancing the self-respect of his Arab audience²³. Even though he wrote out of a lack of understanding, one can argue that this might show some aspects of his honesty and lack of tact, as he was not afraid to write what he saw or thought.

As a missionary for the Baghdad Caliph, it is quite extraordinary that Ibn Fadlan allegedly wrote down and noted all that he saw and was told. Ibn Fadlan writes through the eyes of a Muslim from the city of Baghdad, which at the time, could create biased interpretations due to Islamic and Middle Eastern ideals, culture, and religion varying from those of the Rus.²⁴ This difference creates a significant rift between a well-established empire and a rural nomadic village ruled by Viking chieftains, something we can tell from Ibn Fadlan's *Rhila*²⁵. At one point when describing the Rus and their sanitary manors he says; "*They are the filthiest of all of God's creatures. They have no modesty when it comes to defecating or urinating, and do not wash themselves when intercourse puts them in a state of ritual impurity... Indeed, they are like roaming asses.*"²⁶ This uncensored explanation shows us a bit of who Ibn Fadlan is, and how his background might affect his views. As one can tell from Ibn Fadlan's manner of explaining the Rus and their sanitary, there is a large difference between the two cultures. Ibn Fadlan describes the Rus and their manners in a way that makes it relatively easy to use his notations, even though there are religious and cultural barriers.

Through Ibn Fadlan's narrative, we are able to dissect important information on the Rus as well as his other observations and encounters. Even with some cultural barriers, we can understand the descriptions of Rus traditions and norms relatively easy. On one hand, the narrative shows us an uncensored Ibn Fadlan, which describes things as he sees them, and shares some thoughts

²³ Tim Severin, *Forward on Ibn Fadlan's Mission to the Volga*, 2017, page 13

²⁴ J. E. Montgomery *Mission to the Volga*, (2000), (page. 23)

²⁵ Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, *Mission to the Volga*, (922), Translated by James E. Montgomery (page. 33)

²⁶ Yāqūt's Quotations from *The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. Mission to the Volga*, page. 56. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

on why. On the other hand, a lack of understanding might influence the way things are written down or perceived by Ibn Fadlan, limiting the value of the narrative. Considering the biased nature of Ibn Fadlan's understandings and interpretations of Rus traditions and Norms,²⁷ it is still possible to withdraw relevant information from his *Rihla*. Even though we know little about Ibn Fadlan, his narrative lays some groundwork for who he is, helping us further understand the full extent of his narrative as we get acquainted with his opinions. This may further help us determine the usefulness of the narrative in relation to the Volga Vikings.

²⁷ Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 56. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

Chapter two: The written account

In Ibn Fadlan's account, a much more intimate version of the Rus is described, which may add to the usefulness of his account. Ibn Fadlan himself witnessed the arrival of the Rus as well as the burial rite/ceremony²⁸. By being so close to the Rus, Ibn Fadlan was able to gather more information regarding culture, mores and norms in practice. By witnessing the Rus at such proximity, the travel narrative is made more useful and unique.

The account works as a diary and a logbook, were we get his personal assessments of both the landscape in which our envoy is traveling, as well as the people they meet along their way.²⁹ 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 his account. The main part of the account consists of the Viking funeral, where there were a number of different circumstances to note; It is the funeral of a rich and important man; it is a funeral by cremation; finally, some things in the account can only have been obtained by Ibn Fadlan through an interpreter.³⁰ Striking elements in the funerals description, such as the ‘Angel of Death,³¹ the ritual intercourse,³² and the wary and naked kindler of the pyre,³³ cannot be paralleled in Norse sources. Other items of the ritual are too vague to provide secure links to any other Norse sources.³⁴ The object formed as a “*door-frame*”³⁵ and the vision of paradise “*beautiful and green*”³⁶, that the slave to be sacrificed, witnessed, are both descriptions that are too vague. Ibn Fadlan never asks the interpreter to explain the significance of the objects, nor does the

²⁸ Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, *Mission to the Volga*, (922), Translated by James E. Montgomery (page. 32-39)

²⁹ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 41. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

³⁰ Haraundal, T. J. (2013). *Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity* (PhD dissertation), page 76

³¹ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 58-62. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

³² Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 58-62. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

³³ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 58-62. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

³⁴ Haraundal, T. J. (2013). *Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity* (PhD dissertation), page 75

³⁵ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 58-62. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

³⁶ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 58-62. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

interpreter or other Rus explain the importance of them to Ibn Fadlan.³⁷ Hence, there are important details missing from the burial rite description which we will never obtain. Therefore, when Ibn Fadlan describes his observations of the burial rites, the items used, as well as the ceremonial norms, the significance of the observations are missing.

The boundaries between what is, or might be fiction is somewhat blurred. In the travel narrative we come across a “*giant’s bones*”,³⁸ “*snakes as large as trees*”³⁹ and “*rhinoceros*”⁴⁰. Some of these, such as the rhinoceros and the analogy of snakes and tree trunks, are found in earlier Arabic literature, but as elaborately demonstrated by James Montgomery⁴¹, Ibn Fadlan’s phenomena cannot be connected unequivocally with any of them. Part of the reason, it seems, is that Ibn Fadlan also relied on the oral information of informants and interpreters, such as a sojourn in Bulgar⁴² during his travels⁴³. However, in the sections concerning the Rus, there is a lot more observation, as he notes down what he allegedly sees, as well as what he is told by the Rus.

Through oral dictation as well as his own notes, Ibn Fadlan recorded the events of his journey, making it seemingly controversial. The *Rihla* is composed of both a mixture of notes and writings, as well as an oral dictation of what happened. After his return to Baghdad, he dictated his account down to a writer, whose name is unknown. On one hand, this may help benefit the travel log, as Ibn Fadlan can provide further insight on different occasions and encounters. He is also able to comment on his notes in relation to what he saw and experienced. On the other

³⁷ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 62. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

³⁸ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 41. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

³⁹ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 43. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁴⁰ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 45. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁴¹ J. E. Montgomery *Mission to the Volga*, (2000), (page 10 - 32)

⁴² J. E. Montgomery, ‘Travelling Autopsies: Ibn Fadlan and the Bulghar’, pp. 10–13.

⁴³ Hraundal, T. J. (n.d.). *Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity* (PhD dissertation).

hand, this does leave a lot up to memory, and there is also room for over exaggerations of his experiences, something which may decrease the narratives trustworthiness.

It is evident that Ibn Fadlan possessed literary talent and he creates a dynamic narrative with an acute sense of timing, drama and humor.⁴⁴ This does not mean that his descriptions are fiction, nor does his part as an eyewitness mean that they are corrupted. However, as the narrative most likely contains some information which simply cannot be true, such as “*a giant’s bones*” and “*snakes as large as trees*”, the trustworthiness of his account is diminished. Such writings may be easier to deem fiction than others. What he really experienced and what he did not, is unbeknownst to us, regardless of it being an oral dictation or not. However, through corroboration with other sources written about the Rus, we are able to check similarities or differences which strengthen the narratives trustworthiness or uniqueness, hence determining the usefulness of the source.

⁴⁴ Hraundal, T. J. (n.d.). Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity (PhD dissertation).

Chapter three: Corroboration of Sources regarding Ibn Fadlan's narrative

3.1 Ibn Fadlan & Ibn Rustah's Rihla

Ibn Fadlan is not the only Islamic source which we have on Viking Rus encounters. Significant other Arabic sources explain their encounters with the Rus as well. We can corroborate Arabic-, as well as other significant sources, which have written accounts of what seems to be the same Rus which Ibn Fadlan met. Ibn Fadlan's account falls between the early tenth century (903) passages of Ahmad Ibn Rustah Isfahani⁴⁵ and (947) Al-Mas'udi's work, "*Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*"⁴⁶. These two works are important as they provide the only description of the Rus *in medias res*. Ibn Fadlan's account is most likely closest in time to the *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisa* (Rihla)⁴⁷ of Ibn Rustah which is dated to somewhere after 903. It is a travel narrative, same as Ibn Fadlan. It is assumed that Ibn Rustah also met the same Viking Tribe, or people as Ibn Fadlan, as he calls them the Rusiyyah (Arabic word for Rus) just as Ibn Fadlan.^{48 49} It is possible to identify some similarities between the two accounts; however, some distinct differences can be identified as well.

The Rus are described similar, as tall muscular men and women, all with Scandinavian and northern-European traits.⁵⁰ The rags and clothes can also be identified as similar.⁵¹ They trade in Dinars and other silver currency, which were unknown to Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rustah.⁵²

⁴⁵ J. E. Montgomery ('Ibn Rustah's Lack of 'Eloquence', the Rus, and Samanid Cosmography', *Edebiyat*, vol. 12 (2001), 73–93 (pp. 73–74)

⁴⁶ Al-Mas'udi's Historical Encyclopaedia, Entitled "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems", Volum, translated 1841, page. 45., 127., 131-32.,187-88.,190-192., 327

⁴⁷ Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Ismā'īl ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Rasī. (2017.). *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*. doi:10.1163/1877-8054_cmr_com_2363, pp. 23

⁴⁸ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, (903), pp. 143–45

⁴⁹ Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 41. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁵⁰ Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 55. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁵¹ Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 55. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁵² Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 55. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

Though Ibn Rustah did not witness a Viking burial such as Ibn Fadlan did⁵³, some of the religious rituals seem familiar.⁵⁴ The last part of Ibn Rustah's Rihla contains elements similar to those found in the later works of Ibn Fadlan and Al-Mas'udi's, such as the sacrifice of a woman with her master and the presence of a gold bracelet in funerary rituals.⁵⁵ These similarities indicate that Fadlan's narrative is fairly accurate, as comparable details suggest that these rituals and mores presented, were in fact observed by both Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rustah. Ibn Rustah tells us that the Rus live on a peninsula, surrounded by a lake. Unfortunately, he does not provide any further information of the geographical location. The passage proceeds in disconnected fashion to recite customs, vesture and ceremonial rituals.^{56 57}

Even though these sources contain significant similarities we should not accept everything the two sources agree upon. How much of Rus tradition and culture these travelers experienced and how well this was understood by Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rustah is highly unsure. Other than what is described by Ibn Fadlan from his own account on the Rus, as well as Ibn Rustah's account, we cannot know for sure how much our travelers know of the Rus. It is also highly likely that Ibn Fadlan may have read Ibn Rustah's Rihla before his journey to the Volga.⁵⁸ Given the need for preparations for such an expedition, we can assume that he had some knowledge of the works of earlier writers,⁵⁹ such as Tabari's "*History of prophets and kings*"⁶⁰ or Ibn Rustah's "*Book of Precious Objects*"⁶¹

Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rustah simply experienced a fraction of the Rus culture, and even though some things are similar, such as the muscular men and women, the same rags and clothes and

⁵³ Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, *Mission to the Volga*, (922), Translated by James E. Montgomery (page. 35)

⁵⁴ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, (903), pp. 143–45

⁵⁵ Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, *Mission to the Volga*, (922), Translated by James E. Montgomery (page. 35)

⁵⁶ Haraundal, T. J. (2013). *Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity* (PhD dissertation),

⁵⁷ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, (903), pp. 145-148

⁵⁸ Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, *Mission to the Volga*, (922), Translated by James E. Montgomery (page. 32)

⁵⁹ Haraundal, T. J. *Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity* (PhD dissertation).

⁶⁰ Ṭabarī Jarir al. (1403). *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī: al-ma'rūf bi-Tārīkh al-umam wa-al-mulūk*. Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-A'lamī.

⁶¹ 'Umar, I. R. A. ibn, & Wiet, G. (2008). *Kitāb Al-a'laq al-nafisa*. Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University.

the Dinars and other silver currency they use, there are also significant differences. Ibn Rustah describe the Rus in a favorable manner, praising them for their hospitality and sanitary; *“They carry clean clothes and the men adorn themselves with bracelets and gold. They put great effort in trade...They have a most friendly attitude towards foreigners and strangers who seek refuge”*⁶². However, Ibn Fadlan does not think of them as highly; *“They are the filthiest of all of God’s creatures. They have no modesty when it comes to defecating or urinating, and do not wash themselves when intercourse puts them in a state of ritual impurity... Indeed, they are like roaming asses”*⁶³. However, the fact that the narratives were only 20 years apart, may strengthen the claim that Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Rustah met the same Rus tribe, or at least the Rus people. However, we cannot conclude that this is for sure, seen as Ibn Rustah fails write down the geographical location of his encounter. Despite some differences, Ibn Rustah’s Rihla helps us further understand the Rus, and contributes overall to boost Fadlan’s narrative in terms of content.

⁶² Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a’laq an-nafisah*, (903), pp. 132-149

⁶³ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 56. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

3.2 Ibn Fadlan & corroboration with other sources

Al-Mas'udi's work⁶⁴ contains several passages on the Rus that seem mostly unrelated to the works of his forerunners.⁶⁵ No other author provides us with as many various accounts of the Rus as he does in his historical work, "*Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*"⁶⁶. His literary net was cast far and wide⁶⁷ throughout his diverse historical piece⁶⁸. Al-Mas'udi's notices on the Rus are in some respect more revealing than the account of Ibn Fadlan in that we receive more diverse information – culturally and geographically.⁶⁹ Perhaps this can be explained by the distance between Al-Mas'udi and his object of observation, as Al-Mas'udi collected several passages and accounts of older Rus sightings, as well as his own. Ibn Fadlan, developing his narration as he did among the Rus, often fails to place his observations in a broader context. As of this, Al-Mas'udi's account differs from Ibn Fadlan's perspective. However, this does not necessarily mean that Ibn Fadlan's account is inaccurate. It is important to compare Ibn Fadlan and Al-Mas'udi's work. Even though they differ quite a bit, comparing this unique proximity encounter of Ibn Fadlan and the large dissertation which Al-Mas'udi writes, shows us the importance of Ibn Fadlan's narrative. His narrative is the only eyewitness description of a Viking funeral,⁷⁰ which makes his narrative more unique and useful for further studies of the Volga Vikings/Rus.

Different accounts of the Viking Rus can be traced to different points throughout history. However, not much is known of their traditions nor their history. Some sources, such as the

⁶⁴ Al-Mas'udi's Historical Encyclopaedia, Entitled "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems" (Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawāhir), Volum , translated 1841, page. 45., 127., 131-32.,187-88.,190-192., 327

⁶⁵ Haraundal, T. J. (2013). Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity (PhD dissertation), page 75

⁶⁶ Al-Mas'udi's Historical Encyclopaedia, Entitled "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems" (Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawāhir), Volum , translated 1841, page. 45., 127., 131-32.,187-88.,190-192., 327

⁶⁷ Haraundal, T. J. (2013). Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity (PhD dissertation), page 76

⁶⁸ T. Khalidi, Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'udi (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), pp. 4–5.

⁶⁹ Haraundal, T. J. (2013). Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity (PhD dissertation), page 76

⁷⁰ Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 58. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

“*Povest Vremennikh Let*”⁷¹, a source on the establishment of the Russian province and kingdom, mentions the Rus. The author, a monk who lived in a monastery near Kiev named Nestor, lived between 1056 and 1114⁷². According to the “*Povest Vremennikh Let*” some of the first Viking nomads from northern Scandinavia allegedly arrived in the far north reaches of Russia, near the Volkhov river delta around the year 862⁷³. It is widely believed that these Northern Scandinavian Vikings would eventually become to be known as the Rus.

However, these are mere speculation by historians, as we do not know for sure where the Rus came from.⁷⁴ It is believed that Ibn Fadlan met the descendants of these Scandinavian Vikings/Rus which are described in the “*Povest Vremennikh Let*”. If this indeed is the case, it corroborates well with Ibn Fadlan’s descriptions of the Rus in his narrative; “...*Every man wears a cloak with which he covers half of his body and leaves one arm uncovered...Every woman wears a small box made of Iron, brass, silver or gold, depending on her husband's financial worth and social standing. The box has a ring to which a knife is attached.*”⁷⁵ The knife which Ibn Fadlan speaks of is a scoop, which Viking women often wear, together with other items for personal grooming.⁷⁶ These items used by the Rus, corroborate well with the “*Povest Vremennikh Let*”, and the same Viking tribe which it describes that settled down in the Volga river area.

We are inclined to assume that the narrative is nonfictive in regard to what Ibn Fadlan experienced and that his account is historically accurate. For instance, his encounter with the Rus is generally accepted by scholars worldwide, because Al Mas’udi’s geographical location

⁷¹ Povest' vremennykh let, text prepared by D. S. Likhachev, edited by V. P. 30-50 Adrianova-Peretts (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950), I. All references are to this edition

⁷² Povest' vremennykh let, text prepared by D. S. Likhachev, edited by V. P. 30-50. Adrianova-Peretts (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950), I.

⁷³ Tjønn, H. (2015). *Russland blir til* (1st ed., Vol. 1).Princeton: Markus Wiener, Page 23

⁷⁴ Tjønn, H. (2015). *Russland blir til* (1st ed., Vol. 1).Princeton: Markus Wiener, Page 27

⁷⁵ Yāqūt’s Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 56. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁷⁶ J. E. Montgomery, *Mission to the Volga*, (2000), (page. 74)

generally matches the same area as Ibn Fadlan encountered the Volga Vikings/Rus.⁷⁷ From Al Mas'udi's works we can compare his and Ibn Fadlan's accounts, even though the fundamental contrast and nature of the works makes comparison between the two anything but straightforward. Still, on account of the similarity between both authors' description of the ceremonial customs of the Rus,⁷⁸ it is tempting to assume that they are referring to the same or a likened group and that the similarities indicate that Fadlan's descriptions are mostly correct. The physiological descriptions of the Rus match Ibn Rustah's.⁷⁹ Significant primary sources such as the "*Povest Vremennikh let*" and the "*Mu'jam al-Buldan*"⁸⁰ also describe Rus or Viking nomadic settlements in this area.⁸¹ The other accounts seemingly confirm what Fadlan states in his account, thus making Fadlan's narrative reliable and useful.

⁷⁷ Yāqūt's Quotations from The Book of Ibn Faḍlān. *Mission to the Volga*, page. 55. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gk093h.8

⁷⁸ Al-Mas'ūdī's Historical Encyclopaedia, Entitled "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems" (*Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawāhir*), Volum , translated 1841, page. 45., 127., 131-32.,187-88.,190-192., 327

⁷⁹ Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, (903), pp. 145-148

⁸⁰ Yaqut Al- Hamawi, *The dictionary of countries*, (1179)., World digital library (1905). [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://dl.wdl.org/7444/service/7444.pdf>

⁸¹ *Povest' vremennykh let*, text prepared by D. S. Likhachev, edited by V. P. 50. Adrianova-Peretts (Moscow-Leningrad, 1950),

Conclusion

The account of Ibn Fadlan is a controversial source, but most importantly a useful one. This essay aimed to investigate the usefulness of this source for an historian studying the 10th century Volga Vikings. In relation to that claim, the source provides a lot of insight into both norms, traditions and culture of the Volga Vikings/Rus. His account is also a unique one, as there are no other eyewitness accounts of a Viking burial such as this one.

However, in regard to the travel account, there are some limitations to keep in mind. The extent to which one can separate fiction from reality, seen as the narrative was both a composition of writing and later additions were orally dictated for more information to be added. Cultural barriers, such as a lack of understanding, which could limit the extent to how well the different events are told or misinterpreted. And last, the reliability of the account, as no other source explicitly references the same Rus which Ibn Fadlan encounters or traveled the same route as him. We also do not know for whom his account was intended. If we did, it may have given us some further insight into why he includes his own honest assessments of figures and events.

However, the narrative which Ibn Fadlan presents is well-written, and his account of the Viking funeral is descriptive and shows the uniqueness of the burial. His proximity to the Rus is as well significant, as he is able to witness their traditions more intimately and observe them at close hand. Other sources also strengthen his claims, as there are multiple records of Rus in the same geographical area, and both earlier and later accounts regarding the Rus, are rather similar to Ibn Fadlan's. When he was visiting the Rus, an interpreter accompanied him, something which both lets Ibn Fadlan further understand the significance of some events and speak to the Rus. However, it also hinders him from direct communication with the Viking/Rus tribe.

The analyzation done throughout this paper, provides us with a thorough notion to conclude that the written account of Ahmad ibn Fadlān is to a large extent useful for an historian studying the 10th century Volga Rus/Vikings.

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