THE VIKINGS IN ARABIC SOURCES

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The period of European history 800–1000 CE is known as the period of the Vikings who, from their homeland in Scandinavi, mounted raids on the northern and western coasts of Europe and on Russia, initially for plunder and then for trade and settlement.

They became known to the Muslims, both in the Western and Eastern parts of the Islamic World, after their several raids on the coasts of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) and the Muslim territory in Azerbaijan and to the south of the Caspian Sea. The Andalusians called them Majûs and Urdumanian Majûs since they were heathens who cremated their dead. The Andalusians, therefore, thought them to be like the Zoroastrian Majûs (Magians) of pre-Islamic Persia. Norsemen coming from Sweden across Russia were known in Eastern Arabic sources as Rûs or Rûsiyyah who, from the beginning, carried out extensive trade with Muslim merchants, particularly in the Volga valley, as shown by the large amount of Arabic dirhams discovered in hoards in more than 1000 sites in the islands of the Baltic, in eastern Sweden and near the river banks in Russia. Muslim traders would pay dirhams for the wares of the Norsemen, such as furs, skins, amber and slave-girls.

The Norsemen knew writing, to which Ibn al-Nadîm (who wrote in 987) made the following reference: "I was told by a reliable person that he had been sent by a king (in the Caucasus) to the king of the Rûsiyyah. This person claimed that their writing was inscribed on wood. He showed me a piece of wood with inscriptions on it. I could not tell, however, whether the inscription consisted of words or single letters".1

Andalusian Arabic sources contain several references to the Vikings which pay tribute to their bravery in military encounters. Ibn al-Qūṭiyyah (middle of the 10th century) says that the people of Seville were unable to "confront them [the Vikings] on account of their ferocity and fighting powers".2 The Cordoban historian Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 1076) refers to them as "the fearsome enemy".3 On the seamanship of the Vikings Ibn Saʿīd al-Andalusi (d. 1286)
says: "People living near the coasts [of Muslim Spain] used to flee, in fear, on
hearing of the impending arrival of the Vikings who invariably beat anyone they
encountered on sea and took them captive". 4

SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF THE VIKINGS

We have accounts, written mostly by monks, about Viking raids in England,
Ireland and France, but these accounts are strongly biased against the Vikings
who often pillaged churches and monasteries. Viking sagas, on the other hand,
glorify their adventures and show great esteem for them. They have survived
since, like the mu‘allaqât in pre-Islamic Arabia, they were learnt by heart, sung
at rallies and were eventually written down.

In recent years, archaeological work on Viking sites such as York and
Dublin has led to the discovery of objects which show that the Vikings were
traders and skilled artisans. The vast amount of Arabic silver dirhams discovered
in Scandinavia and Russia shows that the Norsemen carried out extensive trade,
thus prompting historians to describe them as "traders not raiders".

Arabic literary sources, however, are the earliest, fullest and most
reliable sources for the early history of the Vikings, the earliest of these Arabic
sources being the mission of the Andalusian al-Ghazāl (845) to the court of the
Viking king in Ireland, and the mission of the Iraqi Ibn Faḍlān (921–2) to the
king of the Bulghārs in the upper Volga.

MISSION OF AL-GHAZĀL (845)

A group of Vikings raided the western littoral of the Iberian peninsula and
occupied Seville for six weeks (September – October 844). Known in
Andalusian sources as "majūs" and "ardamaniyyūn" – from Latin "Nordmanni"
or "Lordomanni" – the raiders were eventually driven out by the amīr of
Cordoba, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II, and returned to their home base, probably in
Ireland. Ibn ‘Idhārī (who wrote c. 1312) says: "Many of the Majūs were killed
and thirty of their vessels were burnt . . . The amīr ‘Abd al-Raḥmān presented
the Sanhaja chieftains in Tangier with the heads of the leader [of the Majūs] and
of 200 of their redoubtable warriors". 5

Shortly after this defeat, the king of the Vikings sent an envoy to seek
peace with the amīr of Cordoba who, in return, sent a mission to the Viking
king headed by the celebrated Andalusian poet and ambassador, Yahyā,
al-Ghazāl, accompanied by an astronomer, Yahyā b. Ḥabīb.

The fullest surviving account in Arabic sources about al-Ghazāl’s
mission to the Viking court is that of Ibn Dihyā (d. 1235) in Kitāb al-Mutrib,
based on the account of Tammām b. ‘Alqamah, a contemporary of al-Ghazāl.
Ibn Dihyuh says that "al-Ghazāl arrived at the royal residence in a great island in the [Atlantic] Ocean. . . In it are Vikings too numerous to be counted, and around the island are many other islands, large and small, all peopled by Vikings".6 The Vikings, according to al-‘Udhrī, a leading 11th-century Andalusian geographer, have no base other than the island of Ireland.7

Ibn Dihyuh adds that the Vikings were heathens "but they now follow the Christian faith . . . except for the people of a few scattered islands, where they keep to their old faith, with fireworship, the marriage of brothers and sisters and various other kinds of abomination".8

Ibn Dihyuh says that "al-Ghazāl had noteworthy sessions and famous encounters with them, when he debated with their scholars and silenced them, and contended against their champions and outmatched them".9

When the wife of the king of the Vikings – Nūd, in Ibn Dihyuh’s account – heard of al-Ghazāl, she sent for him so that she might see him. He would tell her of the life of the Muslims, of their history and the nations that adjoin them. Cautioned by his companions about his visits, al-Ghazāl became more careful and called on her only every other day. She asked him the reason for this, and he told of the warning he had received. On hearing this, the queen laughed and said to him: "We do not have such things in our religion nor do we have jealously (ghayrah). Our women are with our men only of their own choice. a woman stays with her husband as long as it pleasures her to do so and leaves him if it no longer pleases her".10

Al-Ghazāl’s mission was, as far as we know, the first Muslim mission to the Vikings. Scholars, however, are not in full agreement about the country which the Andalusian envoy visited: Was it the home of the Vikings in Denmark, where King Horik reigned, or was it Ireland where Turgeis reigned over the Norwegian Vikings?11 Lévi-Provençal even thinks that al-Ghazāl’s mission took place in 840 and was to Constantinople, the Byzantine capital.12

Al-Ghazāl indeed had gone to Constantinople in 840 as an envoy of the amir of Cordoba to the Emperor Theophilus, but that was al-Ghazāl’s first mission. His second mission in 845 was to the king of the Vikings in Ireland after the Vikings had raided the western coasts of Spain from their base in Ireland.

From the beginning of the 9th century, Ireland was exposed to raids by the Vikings coming from Norway, whose leader Turgeis had, by 839, occupied the northern half of Ireland. He took as his base Loch Ri, while his wife Ota/Ottar settled slightly to the south in Clonmacnois where there was a church held in high place by the Irish, and from the altar of which Ota would predict
the future. It would appear that al-Ghazâl used to call on Queen Ota at this place where she resided.

Scandinavian and Irish sources of the 9th century say nothing, however, about the arrival of an embassy from Cordoba at the court of the Viking king.

Although a brief one, al-Ghazâl's account about the country he visited is rich in information. The details reflect the type of a Viking woman's life as described in their sagas. Al-Ghazâl's participation in debates and in fencing matches is characteristic of life among the Vikings whose chieftains were fond of discussion, storytelling and riddles. The king probably encouraged the holding of such debates between a prominent Muslim scholar, such as al-Ghazâl, and Irish poets and clergy.

The brief reference to Ota/Ottar in Irish sources shows that she used to practice fortune telling and prediction. Spae-wives were common among Scandinavians at all social levels.

The conversations Ota had with al-Ghazâl about the position of women in Viking society, their freedom in choosing their partners and in staying with them or leaving them if they so wished agrees with the situation which prevailed in Viking society then – among women from the aristocracy in particular – and is confirmed by other sources. A similar account was given by İbrahim al-Ṭurtûshî who was sent in 965 by the Umayyad Caliph of Cordoba, al-Ḫakam II, to the German Emperor Otto I. Speaking about people of the Schleswig province in southern Denmark al-Ṭurtûshî says: "Divorce among them is in the hands of women. A woman divorces herself whenever she wishes".

The mission sent by the amîr of Cordoba, 'Abd al-Raḥmân II, to the King of the Vikings had political as well as economic objectives. The amîr perhaps sought to acquire an ally in his wars with the Frankish king, Charles the Bald. In the first decade of the 9th century, the Franks had wrested Barcelona from Muslim hands and war broke out between the two sides for the control of Catalonia. The weakness of the Frankish kingdom after 841 provided the Muslims of Spain with an opportunity to invade southern France up to the vicinity of Narbonne in 843, i.e. one year before the Viking raid on Seville. Amîr 'Abd al-Raḥmân II may well have wished to secure an alliance with the king of the Vikings against the Franks. In March 845, a Viking fleet sailed up the Seine and attacked and pillaged Paris. A more probable motive, however, could have been an economic one, namely to obtain, through the Vikings, furs and slaves. The reference in Ibn Dihyâh's account to the presence of interpreters at the court of the Viking king can also be taken as an indication that trade relations had already existed between Muslim Spain and the Vikings.
IBN FADLAN'S MISSION (921-2)

Having converted to Islam in the early 10th century, the king of the Bulghars (to the east of Moscow) sent an envoy to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad requesting him to send someone to instruct him and his people in the laws of Islam (shari'ah), and also seeking the caliph's assistance against the king of the Khazars [in the lower Volga] who persisted in mounting attacks against his people, and in exacting tribute form them. In response to his appeal, the caliph sent a mission, a member of which was Ahmad b. Fadlān, which left Baghdad in June 921 and, one year later, arrived at the court of the king of the Bulghars. Ibn Fadlān was thus afforded a unique opportunity to see for himself Swedish merchants, whom he calls Rūs/Rūsiyyah, and arrive at the bank of the Volga where they exchanged their wares with Muslim merchants.

Ibn Fadlān's account is, therefore, a valuable primary source for scholars dealing with the history of the Swedish Norsemen since it is an eyewitness account about a people on whom sparse primary material is available. "No witness of the Vikings anywhere or at any stage of their history provides a more detailed and vivid account than Ibn Fadlān ... Its accuracy is uncontested, and its importance obvious".18

In his account, Ibn Fadlān describes these Rūs merchants - their appearance, hygiene, costumes, weapons, jewellery, religious beliefs, funeral rites, their addiction to drink and their commercial mores. He says:

I have seen the Rūs as they came on their merchant journeys and encamped by the Atil [the Volga]. I have never seen more perfect physical specimens - tall as date palms, blond and ruddy. Each man wore a garment which covered his body on one side and left one side free for action. Each man carried an axe, a Frankish-Type sword and a knife with him. Tattoos covered him from finger-tip to neck ... They drink wine excessively day and night.19

About the women of these Norsemen, ibn Fadlān has this to say:

On their necks they wear rings of gold or silver. If a man acquires ten thousand dirhams, he purchases a necklace for his wife, two necklaces if he acquires twenty thousand dirhams. For each extra ten thousand dirhams acquired, the man purchases an extra necklace.20

The Rūs were heathens and worshipped idols. On arrival of their ships at Bulghar on the Volga:

Everybody goes ashore with bread, meat, onions, milk and wine, and proceeds to a long upright piece of wood that has a face like a man's
. . . The Rūs prostrates himself before it and says: 'O my Lord, I have come from a distant land and have with me such and such a number of slave-girls, and such and such a number of sables', and he proceeds to enumerate all his wares. Then he says, 'I have brought you this gift. . . . I wish that you would send me a merchant with many dinars and dirhams who will buy form me all that I want to sell and who will not disagree with me [over the price]'.

Ibn Faḍlān remarks that these Rūs are the filthiest of God's creatures and that they do not wash after eating. They wash their faces and heads daily in the following manner:

Each morning a slave-girl arrives carrying a large basin full of water. She hands the basin over to her master who proceeds to wash his hands and face. Then he washes his hair and combs his hair in the basin and goes onto clear his nose and spit in the basin . . . The slave-girl then passes the basin to the man next to him who does likewise. She goes on passing the basin to all the men in the house – each one clears his nose, spits in the basin and washes his face and hair in it.

If any of the Rūs was taken ill, he was removed to an isolated place and left with bread and water. If he recovered, he would return to his companions; if not, he would be cremated.

Ibn Faḍlān actually witnessed the funeral rites for a prominent Rūs who was cremated, with one of his slave-girls, in a vessel in which food and meat as well as his weapons were placed. An old woman, whom Ibn Faḍlān calls "the angel of death", presented the slave-girl as a sacrifice to her lord. After the slave-girl was laid side by side with her master and stabbed to death, the vessel was set alight until it turned into ashes. A Rūs, standing next to Ibn Faḍlān, said through an interpreter: 'You Arabs are fools; you take the people you love and respect and put them in the ground where they are eaten up by worms. We burn our loved one in a moment and he enters paradise at once'.

Ibn Faḍlān's account is "of great historical, geographical and ethnographic interest and shows that Ibn Faḍlān possessed extraordinary powers of observation and an enquiring mind which led him to bring back a mass of extremely important information on the Rus".

4Ibn Sa`i’d al-Maghribi, Kitāb al-jughrāfīyyah, See Rerum Normannicarum (Fontes Arabici), Oslo: 1928, p. 11.
9*Idem*, p. 142.
14*Idem*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
15*Idem*, p. 47.
Ibn Hawqal (who wrote in 978) says that the Rûs cremate their dead, and the slave-girls of the wealthy willingly agree to be burnt, while alive, alongside their masters, as the Indians do. (Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-ard*, Beirut: p. 316).
Al-Mas‘ûdî (d. 956) states that when a Rûs dies "his wife, while still alive, is burnt alongside him. When a woman dies, however, her husband is not burnt". (Al-Mas‘ûdî, *Murûj al-Dhahab*, Cairo: 1964, I, p. 179).