

Doctoral Dissertation

Rus' warriorhood. Warfare, society and culture in the Viking Age East (ca. 750–1050)

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Submitted to the Medieval Studies Department of the
Central European University Private University, Vienna

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Medieval Studies

Vienna, Austria
2023

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Acknowledgements

Hereby, I would like express my gratitude to a wide range of people who in some form contributed to the present work. This dissertation grew out of a five-years work at the Medieval Studies department of Central European University. This was a turbulent period in the life of both the university and the department, but even amidst such calamities, collegiality never ceased there. All students and teachers, as well as the entire staff of the department could be enumerated here, and not only on account of fruitful discussions about the Middle Ages but about academic life in general. Since the dissertation grew out of my previous works, where many of these colleagues and friends, also from abroad, are addressed, I will confine myself this time to say thanks to only those who concretely contributed to the writing of the present piece. First and foremost, I am indebted to my supervisor, József Laszlovszky for his continuous support throughout my studies and now in the paths of my early career. On my pre-defense, I have received detailed commentaries from my opponents, Márta Font and Miklós Takács, my internal reader Daniel Ziemann, as well as my peers, Bernat Racz, Samuel Beňa, Jack Wilson, Michał Machalski, Karsten Johannes Schuil and Jason Snider, for which I cannot thank them enough. Gratitude should also go to colleagues abroad, including Jonathan Shepard, Sverrir Jakobsson, Neil Price, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Gareth Williams and many others for their commentaries on my conference papers or earlier written versions of some of the chapters.

I have published some of the images and maps in the appendix previously, but the credit for acquiring or creating these should go again to Attila Türk, Péter Langó, Béla Nagy and Krisztián Balla. My sincerest thank goes to my Arabic teacher and dear friend, Diána Kiss for her immense help not only for her aid with the translations, but also the meticulous inspection of the entire manuscript in search of any orthographic errors in Arabic words. Naturally, all remaining errors are my own.

Writing this thesis would not have been possible without the financial support of various organizations in the form of scholarships, including CEU's doctoral stipend, the Legend of the Eastern Vikings visiting scholarship, and awards from the Hungarian New National Excellence Programme. I am very grateful for their support.

A note on transcription

One of the most difficult tasks was to decide on a principle of transcription of foreign words. Given the wide variety of source languages, I felt it would be disturbing to leave everything in the original, however, anglicizing everything also raised problems.

Geographical names are mostly anglicized, unless appear in quotes. I preferred the simpler forms (e.g. in case of Russian names: Gnezdovo instead of Gnëzdovo), but left the original expressions intact (e.g. Staraya Ladoga instead of Old Ladoga, Rurikovo Gorodische instead of Rurik's stronghold). This also means that the orthographically more standard English equivalent had been chosen, thus Kiev and Chernigov, instead of the Ukrainian Kyiv and Chernihiv.

Personal names and source quotations from Arabic and Old Norse remained in the original, but geographical names are replaced with English equivalents. Arabic letters are transcribed according to the ACA-LC 1997 system. Old Norse names appear in the original with some exceptions. They are not inflected if they come from a source which is not written in Old Norse (e.g. Asmund instead of Ásmundr). In source quotations, the Old Norse -o with an ogonek (-ø) has been replaced with the letter -ö as customary in many publications. Byzantine and Latin names are also anglicized, as it felt more natural to reference to Constantine Porphyrogenitus (the Latinized version) than to Kōnstantinos Porphyrogennētos, or to (Saint) Stephen than to (Sanctus) Stephanus. Other rulers' names appear in standard anglicized forms (Edmund Ironside, Mieszko, Yaroslav, Sviatoslav, etc.). In the case of ethnonyms or geographical names where multiple spellings are customary, I resorted to options arbitrarily. In accordance, Bulghars denote the Volga Bulghars, but Bulgar refers to their town. The word Rus' is used with an apostrophe throughout denoting both singular and plural.

Sources are cited in the original, except for most Persian texts. However, translations other than in Old Norse or Latin are rarely my own, and I have resorted to easily accessible translations or bilingual source editions. Where the passage required deeper treatment, I have turned to specialists, whose help is always indicated in the translation of various passages.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Woe is me, that I see a fierce and savage tribe fearlessly poured round the city, ravaging suburbs, destroying everything, ruining everything, fields, houses, herds, beasts of burden, women, children, old men, youths, thrusting their sword through everything, taking pity on nothing, sparing nothing.”¹ (Patriarch Photius, 860)

“When a son is born, the father throws a naked sword before him and says: ‘I leave you no inheritance. All you possess is what you can gain with this sword.’”² (Ibn Rusta, ca. 903–913)

“I have never seen bodies as nearly perfect as theirs. As tall as palm trees, fair and reddish [...] They carry axes, swords, and daggers and always have them to hand. They use Frankish swords with broad, ridged blades. They are dark from the tips of their toes right up to their necks—trees, pictures, and the like.”³ (Ibn Faḍlān, 922)

“They are a mighty nation with vast frames and great courage. They know not defeat, nor does any of them turn his back till he slay or be slain.”⁴ (Miskawayh, ca. 982)

Warfare forms a central feature of the period, which we know today as the Viking Age (ca. 750–1050). It is usually hallmarked with a violent outburst of population from Scandinavia, with which contemporary European powers were struggling for centuries. Contemporaries perceived the participants of these hostile attacks as something out of the ordinary. The opening quotes above vividly capture this narrative. In the minds of medieval observers, the lamentation of their sufferings from ‘barbarian’ cruelty is often paired with an astonishment about their foes’ reckless bravery on the battlefield, their admirable distinct body-build and threatening warlike appearance; all given birth to by a warrior society in which fighting and honour meant everything already from childhood. Yet, although the tone and experience shining through the above cited texts could well have been written by European chroniclers and clerics, none of them were produced in the West about ‘traditional vikings’. The accounts address a culturally hybrid, ethnically inclusive group of Scandinavians, who were active alongside the Dnieper, Volga and many other rivers on the eastern side of the Continent, and in the regions of the Black and Caspian seas (*Map 1.*; *Map 2.*). The authors’ impression – much

¹ Cyril Mango (ed. and trans.), *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 88–9; original: Photius, “De Rossorum incursione homoliæ duæ”, in *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum*. Vol. 5, ed. Carl Müller (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1883), 165.

² Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (ed.), *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of the Darkness: Arabic Travellers in the far North* (London: Penguin, 2012), 126; original: BGA I–7, 145.

³ Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, trans. James E. Montgomery, in *Two Arabic Travel Books*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy and Shawkat M. Toorawa (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 240–1.

⁴ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion of the experiences of the nations*, Vol. 2, trans. D. S. Margoliouth, *The Eclipse of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate. Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century*, Vol. 5 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1921), 67; original: Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion of the experiences of the nations*, Vol. 2, ed. H. F. Amedroz, *The Eclipse of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate. Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century*, Vol. 2, Arabic text (Oxford: Blackwell, 1921), 62.

echoing those of Charlemagne's scholar, Alcuin, the anonymous author of the Old English poem of the Battle of Maldon or that of the Frankish annals and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle(s) – aptly reflect contemporary attitudes of Byzantine Greek, Arabic and Persian writers towards the people called in their own languages as Rus', an oft-criticized, yet not wholly misleading label for 'eastern vikings'.

Scholarship, from the mid-twentieth century onwards was keen on revising the one-sided picture of the 'destructive viking' by highlighting that Viking Age Scandinavians were just as much explorers, traders, craftsmen, farmers and artists as marauding raiders or foreign invaders.⁵ Still, it remains true enough that the concept of the Viking Age is to be sought in violence: the original meaning of the term *viking* (ON. *víkingr*) is roughly translatable as 'pirate', and viking warfare with its all-encompassing military, social, religious and cultural roles and connotations has always formed the subject of extensive inquiry.⁶ The case of the Rus' is much comparable and forms an integral part to this pattern. Contemporary witnesses, among them the two cited Muslim authors – an anonymous Arab traveller of the 870–80s, copied here by Ibn Rusta, and the eyewitness Ibn Faḍlān in 922 –, both hallmark their lucrative commercial business in furs and slaves.⁷ The well-informed Buwayhid scholar Miskawayh, in his near-contemporary report based on survival testimonies, alludes to their aspiration towards peaceful co-habitation with the local Muslim inhabitants near the Caspian Sea during their campaign against the town of Bardha'ah in 943.⁸ In the case of the Byzantine patriarch, Photius, it becomes obvious from other sources that diplomatic and mercantile interactions between the Byzantines and the Rus' preceded the raid of 860 commemorated in his sermon; there is an element of surprise in his words over the sudden attack of these 'barbarians', whom he surely knew beforehand as traders and envoys.⁹ As apparent, however, none of these authors thought about the Rus' as merely innocent traders, settlers or diplomats, and immediately articulated the warlike nature of their society in the beginning of their accounts. As shall be seen, this was not a solitary view of these few eastern authors. The world of the Rus' was a fundamentally viking world.

The dynamic, often violent, movement of people from the Northern fringes of Europe enmeshed not only the western side of the Continent, but also territories far beyond. This movement was variously called 'expansion', 'settlement', 'conquest' or roughly equivalent; none of which entirely grasp the complexity of migrations in the period in which Scandinavians were the prime, but not the

⁵ The pioneer of this thinking was the British scholar Peter Sawyer, whose influence defined the tracks of research for decades. Peter Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1971).

⁶ Caitlin Ellis, "Remembering the Vikings: Violence, institutional memory and the instruments of history", *History Compass* 19 (2021): 1–14.

⁷ BGA I–7, 145–6; Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–5.

⁸ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 63.

⁹ Jonathan Shepard, "Photios' sermons on the Rus attack of 860: The questions of his origins, and of the route of the Rus", in *Prosopon Rhomaikon. Ergänzende Studien zur Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*, ed. Alexander Beihammer, Bettina Krönung and Claudia Ludwig (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2017), 111–28.

only, movers. The world of the vikings was rather built on *diasporas*, a term originally borrowed from Jewish studies and based on the premise of shared identities, language (in this case Old Norse) and interconnections between Scandinavian groups on remote parts of the early medieval world. The Scandinavian voyages to North America, related in the story of the so-called Vinland sagas, are seen today as one of the major achievements of Scandinavian maritime expansion during the Viking Age. Their short-lived encampments, confirmed by archaeological research in L'anse aux Meadows in New Foundland, were the westernmost edges of a network of Scandinavian settlement.¹⁰ However, other important voyages were conducted by the Scandinavians to the other direction as well: East. People embarking on such a journey stepped on the *austrvegr*, the 'Eastern Road' in the Old Norse imagination, which in general encompassed the eastern Baltic region, today's European Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, as well as the Black Sea region, Byzantium, the Caucasus, the Islamic Caliphates and even beyond.¹¹ The eastern edge of the Scandinavian diaspora stretched to somewhere in modern-day Uzbekistan, evidenced by a runestone inscription found in Västmanland (Sweden), which testifies about a trip to the Central Asian Khwarazm.¹² Scandinavian traders in the East were actively linked to the system of the Silk Roads, the Eurasian highways through which goods, objects, knowledge, ideas, people and sometimes even diseases moved along. They mostly maintained long-distance exchange with the Islamic lands; the Abbasid caliphate in the ninth and the Samanid regimes in the tenth century. Central commercial hubs of the latter, such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Merv were instrumental in producing and transmitting silver in the form of coins, as well as exotic products and raw materials, most importantly textiles and precious metals and gemstones, from Central Asia towards North.¹³

Thus, North America and Central Asia constituted the geographic boundaries of this network, in which people of Scandinavian origin moved across, maintained contacts and shared a sense of belonging. However, interactions with local inhabitants on the lands visited, the natural environment and the social make-up of migrants created variegated communities within this network, not to count the original cultural differences which existed in the Scandinavian homelands. Social groups, political leadership, religion, material culture, as well as funerary and everyday customs could highly differ

¹⁰ Birgitta Wallace, "The discovery of Vinland", in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 604–12.

¹¹ Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001), 89–107.

¹² Sven B. F. Jansson, *Västmanlands runinskrifter* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1964), 8–9; Helmer Gustavsson, "Runmonumentet i Rytterne", in *Nya anteckningar om Rytterns socken*, ed. Olle Ferm (Västerås: Västmanlands läns museum, 2002), 145–9.

¹³ Melanie Michailidis, "Samanid Silver and Trade along the Fur Route", *Medieval Encounters* 18, no. 4–5 (2013): 315–38; Jonathan Shepard, "Networks", *Past & Present Supplement* 13 (2018): 120–1, 137–8; Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, "With Asia as neighbour: Archaeological evidence of contacts between Scandinavia and Central Asia in the Viking Age and the Tang Dynasty", *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 81 (2020): 43–64.

and gave rise to hybrid forms of identities outside (but also inside) mainland Scandinavia.¹⁴ The viking diaspora was both a place of unity and of difference. As a prominent scholar once put it: it is one of the tasks of future research to reveal how one viking differed from another within this network.¹⁵ The dichotomy is best be deciphered through concrete examples, which illustrate the interconnectedness as well as the regional variations within this network. The case of the Rus' in this regard only recently started to gain impetus, the eastern Scandinavian voyages – and the Rus' – formerly usually relegated to a side track of the 'viking story', more like exotica than something crucially integral to the whole phenomenon. This largely derived from political enmities and the lack of scholarly consensus on how much should the Rus' as an eclectic group mixing with the Slavs and others, be regarded as 'vikings'.

A comparative perspective is all the more desirable to understand the colourful nature of viking activity, the place of the eastern events and that of the Rus' within this violent epoch. Albeit naturally being integral to it, adding an eastern perspective to the picture should not stick to a traditional military historical approach, but offer snapshots of the social and cultural make-up of the warrior society under investigation. The main targets of the present inquiry are military elites famously receptive of foreign ideas, as well as retainers and mercenaries migrating between courts as transmitters of knowledge, fashion and material cultural all across the viking world.¹⁶ The cultural experience of eastern viking/Rus' warrior groups varied greatly over a large geo-political arena. Entering into contacts with cultural milieus of different kinds, geographically extend the viking phenomenon towards the Slavic lands through Byzantium and the western branches of the Eurasian steppes to the fringes of the Islamic spheres. Pirates, conquerors, retainers, mercenaries and warrior-merchant fortune-seekers (occupational categories which are not always separable) had endured varying experience and conditions in these locales. Cultural diversity, including weaponry, diet, dressing and so forth, and various experience such as knowledge of local languages, warfare techniques, strategies, mentality, fauna and flora all characterized Scandinavian and Rus' groupings differently. Since Scandinavians arrived in the East from the North Atlantic, Denmark, Sweden and Norway as well, eastern influences further deepened the already existing cultural differences. Thus, by 'wandering' around, and back and forth between these places resulted in 'vikings' becoming carriers of these cultural packages by which they made courts more alike ('globalized' if one likes the term) but at the same time they themselves started to differ from other members of the diaspora. The

¹⁴ Fredrik Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, Vol. 1–2 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003); Clare Downham, "Viking Ethnicities: A Historiographic Overview", *History Compass* 10, no. 1 (2012): 1–12; Thomas S. Noonan, "The Vikings and Russia: Some New Directions and Approaches to an Old Problem", in *Social approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991), 207–21.

¹⁵ Noonan, "The Vikings and Russia", 205.

¹⁶ Lesley Abrams, "Diaspora and Identity in the Viking Age", *Early Medieval Europe* 20, no. 1 (2012): 24.

interaction with these peers also transformed Rus' and eastern Scandinavian warrior societies (or certain groups of it) in deeper levels. Parts of these 'eastern vikings' became familiar with foreign models of political leadership, various voluntary or forced military positions often demanding extreme devotion, and religious practices and beliefs from various backgrounds. These, to a larger or lesser degree, infiltrated into the life of warrior groups, or at least added to their socio-cultural experience.

Thus, warfare, society and culture were interwoven aspects of the viking phenomenon across the globe, and the present work will follow suit in treating these themes together through the prism of eastern viking/Rus' warriorhood. The dissertation aims to contribute to the field of international viking studies through a multi-disciplinary examination of miscellaneous written sources, produced in a variety of languages including Byzantine Greek, Arabic, Persian, Old Church Slavonic, Old Norse and Latin, as well as the archaeological evidence. Besides a basic methodology of measuring the sources' historicity and contrasting them with each other and the contemporary material remains, a comparative angle with western viking events is often pursued. The comparative material is often based on secondary works of modern scholarship as in-depth analysis of the pertaining sources would extend the framework of this dissertation too far, let alone to mention the difficulties of being equally familiar with all the different kinds of evidence.

The chronological and geographical boundaries of the present work, as said, is set in the eighth to eleventh-century Viking Age East, the territory outlined above. Some clarifications, however, need to be appointed. The main focus falls on the ninth-tenth-century Rus', but it also entails eastern Scandinavia, most notably the town of Birka as being part of the same networks. As stepping on the *austurvegr*, groups and individuals arriving directly from Scandinavia, are naturally part of the story, however, a thorough treatment of them would deviate from my point of seeing the Rus' as a peculiar yet familiar case of the viking phenomenon. Not all Scandinavians venturing East were or became Rus', even if they were closely involved with this sphere. The famous viking leader, Varangian guardsman and later Norwegian king (1046–66), Haraldr Sigurðarson, commonly known through his nickname *harðráði* ('hard-ruler') spent most of his adventurous life in the East: serving under the Rus' *knyaz* Yaroslav the Wise (1019–54) in Rus' civil wars, and later touring the Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Near East as leader of the Scandinavian mercenary forces in Byzantine pay before returning to Norway and finally perishing in the last viking expedition in England at Stamford Bridge in 1066. He was definitely an 'eastern viking' for most of his career, and a vivid example of the interconnectedness of the viking diasporas. Other than this, however, his example would add little to my argument on Rus' warrior experience, and his life has been the subject of thorough treatment from

various angles.¹⁷ In a similar vein, other topics are also tangentially touched, such as the case of the vikings' presence in Poland. Discussion on the Baltic *emporium* and their relations to the Scandinavian homelands is vigorous in the field of archaeologists. Retrospective Old Norse sagas relevant to the Polish case has been explored too.¹⁸ However, the lack of trustworthy contemporary sources on the presence of vikings in the Polish retinue, called *družina*, prompted me to treat the Polish case as a mere example of the cavalcade of locales, where viking warriors might have popped up. The same goes for Bohemia. The partial connections of Poland to the Rus' question, of course, will be addressed in due course especially in the case of one cemetery. The Scandinavian and Rus' presence in Hungary is more relevant in this regard as there are signs of cultural co-operation. A more detailed treatment was also encouraged by the lack of knowledge of western research on this issue. This is the reason why hitherto unexamined sources will close the dissertation, documenting about possibly Scandinavian retainers arriving in Hungary from the Kievan Rus' in the Late Viking Age. As a snake biting its own tail, this last sojourn is not much different from the story of Haraldr Sigurðarson, as the story circularly returns to the other end of the viking world, serving only to supplement the 'viking' retinue service with a – time and space-wise – new data. This last scenario, however, is completely unknown in scholarship, therefore I thought it serves well as an epilogue tying together Iceland, Hungary, the Kievan Rus' and retracing the 'eastern viking' experience to the wider viking world.

Therefore, the structure of this dissertation is somewhat idiosyncratic, and is on occasion more reminiscent of a collection of loosely connected essays running along the themes of various warrior experience in the East. The main goal is twofold: on the one hand to illuminate the various spheres of eastern viking/Rus' military activity and complexities of 'warriorhood' in social and cultural terms, on the other hand to offer results (with the involvement of hitherto neglected evidence or undrawn comparisons) concerning political history related to Rus' warfare in the perspective of the global Viking Age. Some chapters contribute more to the theoretical side, others are more concerned with unravelling concrete historical information on smaller themes. This structure was necessitated by the nature of the miscellaneous evidence: sometimes bits and pieces are being offered by the written records, whilst in other cases a fuller argument could be developed. It became clear during the writing process that an evened and very systematic analysis would be futile as some themes are simply not addressed in the material. Nevertheless, even though some of the main themes are more loosely

¹⁷ For example: Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 52–104; Ruth Mazo Karras, "Haraldr harðráði ("hard-ruler") Sigurðarson", in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano, Kirsten Wolf (London: Routledge, 1993), 266–7; Sverrir Jakobsson, *The Varangians. In God's Holy Fire* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 75–88.

¹⁸ Jakub Morawiec, *Vikings among the Slavs. Jomsborg and the Jomsvikings in Old Norse Tradition*, *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* 17 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2009).

connected, they are running through most of the chapters and can form the basis of further studies or serve comparative purposes in viking studies.

The first analytical section, chapter 3, entitled *Warrior-merchants*, discusses the interrelated nature of mercantile and warrior activity in the East, mainly through a long discussion of Rus' sword production and trade. The chronological layers of these Rus' activities will be refined and put into the context of the same phenomenon in a Scandinavian Viking Age perspective. The bulk of the evidence here consists of Muslim sources, and a long historiographical discussion on each individual source will be conducted, making it unnecessary to repeat in later chapters.

The fourth chapter, *Retainers* deals with the most visible aspect of Rus' warriorhood: retinue service performed in various courts of the East. As the chapter will bring out, individual warrior experience benefitted from contacts with different cultures including those of the Slavs, Greeks and steppe nomads. The military-cultural impact of the latter markedly stands out in the archaeological record, suggesting that it went hand-in-hand with borrowing elements of lifestyles from the Turkic elites of the steppes.

Building on this, some groups of Rus' might have developed a new, hybrid identity and be termed as *Steppe vikings* (title of the fifth chapter) on account of their close resemblance of the external appearance of steppe nomads. The evolving ritual traditions of the Rus', which manifest just as much uniformity as variation, drew extensively on this cultural sphere also, curiously internalizing an amalgam of rites, customs and beliefs from the pre-Christian Slavic, Scandinavian and Turkic worlds, but probably still maintaining its links to the wider viking diasporas.

Following up on some of the findings of the previous chapter, the next scenario to be addressed in the next chapter, called *Slave soldiers*, is a specific Rus' belief concerning afterlife military service. This belief will be put into a wider cultural context and illuminated through comparative examples across Eurasia. The discussion will be preceded by a historical summary on Rus' captives, which allowed for some of these warriors to be enslaved and/or be recruited forcefully as fighters into the service of foreign powers. This will give ground to contrast various subordinate military positions into which Rus' warriors could fall in the East, including the service of enemies as well as one's own lords in this world and the afterlife.

The seventh section, entitled *Raiders*, summarizes traditional military historical themes and returns to the basics of the viking phenomenon: raids and campaigns. These are central topics in viking warfare and the Rus' experience shall be viewed in contrast to western viking activity. The number of raids as well as larger expeditions of the Rus' will be discussed with a focus on frequency, the relative scale of the undertakings (the number of ships and men involved can only roughly be measured), as well as the organization and operation of warbands and armies. The last part of the chapter will outline features which were specific to Rus' military encounters as opposed to the West.

I attribute these peculiarities once again mainly to the geographical and political circumstances of the region, namely the steppes and the nomads as immediate neighbours of the Rus’.

The (eastern) King’s Men is the last thematic chapter as briefly alluded to above. It would like to tentatively suggest a connection between two sources of otherwise late-provenance, but both accounting of the same phenomenon: the presence of viking (Scandinavian? Rus’?) warriors in Hungary during the very Late Viking Age. *Örvar Odds saga* and the Hungarian *Illuminated Chronicle* might have preserved snippets regarding this, which, if accepted, further widens the horizon of the global viking world. Although the conclusion is provisory, the possibility in itself indicates to a broadening of eastern viking activity in hitherto unassumed locales and times.

As natural, the dissertation closes with a summary of the results – particular and theoretical – and opens up avenues for future research. The conclusion is followed by an appendix including maps, figures and tables, as well as a separate bibliography. Before moving on to the analysis, an introduction into previous scholarship, the terminologies and the source material shall be presented.

Previous scholarship

Several themes related to viking warfare, which will resurface in this dissertation, have been explored by interdisciplinary scholarship, among them:

1. the interlinks between trading and raiding activity¹⁹
2. the functioning of warbands or retinues²⁰
3. the cultural acculturation, assimilation (or roughly equivalent) of Scandinavians in the areas they settled in or stayed for long, and the ethnic inclusivity of viking groups²¹
4. their fatalistic beliefs in which stout-hearted warriors unfear of death have been socialized²²
5. the composition, organization, size, strategy and tactics of viking armies²³

¹⁹ Almost every overview since Sawyer highlight this association. For a more specific cross-section of the two, see viking slaving practices and camps as markets. E.g. Ben Raffield: “Bound in captivity: intersections of viking raiding, slaving and settlement in Western Europe during the ninth century CE”, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 47, no. 4 (2022): 414–37.

²⁰ See below under the terminologies section.

²¹ Downham, “Viking Ethnicities”; genetic studies are notable in this regard too and will be referenced later. An influential overview, however is found in: Ashot Margaryan, Daniel J. Lawson, Martin Sikora *et al.* “Population genomics of the Viking world”, *Nature* 585 (2020): 390–6. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2688-8>

²² Andreas Nordberg, *Krigarnas i Odins sal. Dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2004); Jens Peter Schjødt, “The Warrior in Old Norse Religion”, in *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages. Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faroes*, eds. Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal and Ian Beuermann, *The Northern World*, no. 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 269–95; for the Germanic background: Michael L. Enright, *The Lady with a Mead Cup. Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996).

²³ Especially notable are the works of Ben Raffield, Neil Price, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Gareth Williams, Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards, and many others. Their works will be referenced extensively in the following analytical

6. the different layers of warrior identity, and the sources' vocabulary illustrating the various shades of warriorhood²⁴
7. weaponry²⁵
8. mercenary service for fiefs and money²⁶
9. fortifications and camps²⁷

The footnotes provided to the list above are exemplary and in no way comprehensive, but most of them offer convenient starting points for further guidance. However, there is a discrepancy in scholarship regarding the treatment of viking warfare, as most of these studies focus on the western activities of the Scandinavians. However, 'viking activity' did not only affect most parts of contemporary Europe, but also territories beyond. Not only the Anglo-Saxons kingdoms on the British Isles, the fragmented Carolingian Frankia, or Umayyad Cordoba and the western Mediterranean coastland experienced viking raids. Tribal communities around the Baltics, European Russia and Ukraine, as well as the Abbasid Caliphate(s) and the Byzantine Empire also fell victim to expeditions aiming to take portable loot and slaves or extort tributes or other prerogatives.

The omission derives from long-held political enmities as well as scientific barriers. Viking Age Scandinavians active in the East, usually appeared under the contested designations Rus', or Varangians in contemporary sources. These became the subjects of a politically motivated debate between Slavophile and Germanist scientists starting off from the nineteenth-century. Whilst one bloc of scholars, called the 'Normanists', postulated that the different variants of the term Rus' in contemporary Latin, Muslim and Byzantine, and later Slavic sources refer to Scandinavians, the other camp, the 'anti-Normanists', maintained the Slavic origin of the designation, and denied any

chapters.

²⁴ Gareth Williams, "Warfare & Military Expansion", in *Viking*, eds. Gareth Williams, Peter Pentz and Matthias Wemhoff (Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 2013), 76–115; Neil Price, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Torun Zachrisson, Anna Kjellström, Jan Storå, Maja Krzewińska, Torsten Günther, Verónica Sobrado, Mattias Jakobsson and Anders Götherström, "Viking warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj. 581", *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 181–198; Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 187–203, 216–42.

²⁵ Anne Pedersen, "Viking weaponry", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 204–11; Gareth Williams, *Weapons of the Viking warrior* (Oxford: Osprey, 2019).

²⁶ Niels Lund, "Allies of God or Man? The Viking Expansion in a European Perspective", *Viator* 20 (1989): 45–59; Simon Coupland, "From poachers to gamekeepers: Scandinavian warlords and Carolingian kings", *Early Medieval Europe* 7, no. 1 (1998): 85–114; Richard Abels, "Household Men, Mercenaries and Vikings in Anglo-Saxon England", in *Mercenaries and Paid Men. The Mercenary Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. John France, History of Warfare, no. 47 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 143–65.

²⁷ See some of the essays in: *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, AD 1–1300*, eds. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen and Birthe L. Clausen (Copenhagen: PNM, 1997); and *The Martial Society. Aspects of warriors, fortifications and social change in Scandinavia*, eds. Lena Holmquist Olausson and Michael Olausson (Stockholm: Archaeological Research Laboratory, 2009). These two volumes touch on several of the themes mentioned. A new collection of essays on viking camps was unfortunately unavailable to me at the time of writing: Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and Irene García Losquiño (eds.), *Viking Camps: Case Studies and Comparisons*, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, no. 5 (London: Routledge, 2023).

connections to a Germanic population which finally could give its name to modern Russia.²⁸ Although the unequivocal elusion of the Rus' with the Slavs or with purely 'eastern Scandinavians' is now outdated, antagonist scholarly attitudes are not entirely gone.²⁹ There is still no consensus on the precise meaning of the term, Rus', and on the development of Rus' identity in general, nor on the exact role of the Scandinavians in the founding and maintenance of the first East Slavic state, which came to be known as the Kievan Rus'.

This disagreement first of all discourages researchers to take the Rus' under the same umbrella as Scandinavian vikings as it is simply unknown to what extent they should be still regarded as such, given their mixing with the local population of the region of today's Baltics, Belarus, European Russia and Ukraine. Secondly, the Rus' and Varangians for a while were mostly associated with exclusively Swedish vikings whose history took its special turn and should be studied on its own rather than be fitted into the wider viking (hi)story. Naturally, every book on the vikings written since the mid-twentieth century earned a chapter on the 'eastern voyages', but this was usually presented as a side track of the main line of inquiry.

Lastly, there are the scientific obstacles: written sources on the region were produced by outsiders and in a huge variety of languages including Arabic, Persian, Latin, Byzantine Greek, Old Church Slavonic and Old Norse. No researcher on its own is able to master all these source languages, and especially not in the same depth. In addition, the written accounts just mentioned, with a few exceptions, are quite brief and hard to interpret, thus the information to be squeezed out of them is limited in comparison to the 'western viking' events. The most important and extensive type of evidence comes from the archaeological record, which is actually way more numerous here than in the West, or even in Denmark.³⁰ This, however, adds another disciplinary obstacle. Any study which tries to overview Rus' history has to deal with the physical material too. The legacy of Soviet science hindered co-operation in this field for long, and the more traditional viewpoints of Russian archaeologists contrasted with that of their Scandinavian colleagues. Only a few of the latter had access to the material or was able to read in Russian.

There are of course notable exceptions. 'Eastern viking' and Rus' warfare were also the subject of considerable research. Comprehensive studies on Rus' history and archaeology naturally often allude to political and military events or phenomena. The most notable ones remain Simon Franklin and

²⁸ On the atmosphere of the debate: Leo S. Klejn, *Soviet archaeology: Trends, Schools, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 82, 115–20.

²⁹ Elena A. Mel'nikova, "The 'Varangian problem'. Science in the grip of ideology and politics", in *Russia's Identity in International Relations*, ed. Raymond Taras (London: Routledge, 2012), 42–52.

³⁰ Fedir Androshchuk, "The Vikings in the East", in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 517.

Jonathan Shepard's co-authored *The Emergence of Rus*, serving as a standard textbook now.³¹ In English, a good general summary of the archaeological evidence in its historical context has been published by Wladyslaw Duczko, whilst Fedir Androshchuk's essays collected in his *Vikings in the East* volume are indispensable and present in-depth insights.³²

Research on the history of the Rus' gained new impetus with the fashionable trend of 'Global History', which – despite its sound anachronism – was projected back with success to the Middle Ages as well. Silk Road studies obviously belong here too, and the Rus' are now frequent actors on the pages of writings embracing the 'Global Middle Ages'.³³ Links between viking warrior groups in West and East have been also sought out on the basis of archaeological evidence: Islamic dirhems, carnelian beads and Rus' sword-chapes found in the Great Army's camps in England are telling mementoes of this. The list goes on with affiliated finds in France and scattered written and sigillographic evidence on additional Scandinavian–Rus' contacts.³⁴

As apparent, the foremost work on Rus' warfare has been done by archaeologists. Even though it is not his profile exclusively, Androshchuk is one of the leading figures on Rus' warfare. He wrote extensively on weaponry, especially swords, fortifications and warrior graves, which are outstandingly crucial for the present dissertation.³⁵ His excessive knowledge of the Russian and Ukrainian archaeological material paired with expertise in Scandinavian (mainly Swedish) archaeology brings in a highly important comparative angle. The decades long work of another archaeologist, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson on the Scandinavian Birka and eastern Scandinavian activity also earned inexhaustible merit. Her research focuses on Viking Age warrior identities, the eastern connections of Sweden and other related fields.³⁶ Although great archaeologists as T. J. Arne and Holger Arbman preceded her with a systematic collection of the 'oriental' horizon of objects

³¹ Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200* (London: Routledge, 2013 [1996]).

³² Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus. Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Fedir Androshchuk, *Vikings in the East. Essays on Contacts along the Road to Byzantium (800–1100)*, Studia Byzantina Upsalensia, no. 14 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2013).

³³ Shepard, "Networks", 120–1, 127, 147–8, 154; Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000. When explorers connected the world – and globalization began* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2020); Cat Jarman, *River Kings. A New History of the Vikings from Scandinavia to the Silk Roads* (Dublin: Harper Collins, 2021).

³⁴ See below on Rus' history.

³⁵ E.g. Fedir Androshchuk, *Viking swords. Swords and social aspects of weaponry in Viking Age societies* (Stockholm: Swedish History Museum, 2014); Fedir Androshchuk, "Chernigov et Shestovitsa, Birka et Hovgården: le modèle urbain scandinave vu de l'est" in *Les Centres russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, in *Actes du Colloque International tenu au Collège de France en octobre 1997*, eds. Michel Kazanski, Anne Nercessian and Constantine Zuckerman, *Réalités byzantines 7* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 2000), 258–66; Androshchuk, "Vikings in the East"; Androshchuk, *Vikings in the East*.

³⁶ E.g. Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, *The Birka warrior. The material culture of a martial society*, Ph.D dissertation (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2006); Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Warrior identities in Viking-Age Scandinavia", in *Vikings Across Boundaries: Viking-Age Transformations*, Vol. 2, eds. Hanne Lovise Aannestad, Unn Pedersen, Marianne Moen, Elise Naumann and Heidi Lund Berg (London: Routledge, 2020), 179–94; Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and Lena Holmquist Olausson, *The Oriental Mounts from Birka's Garrison. An Expression of Warrior Rank and Status*, Antikvariskt arkiv, no. 81 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2006).

found in Scandinavia,³⁷ she is one of those (besides Androshchuk), who called attention in detail to the steppe nomadic impact on eastern Scandinavian and Rus' warrior culture in several of her publications.³⁸ Connected to these are the works of Ingmar Jansson, who dealt with nomadic military belts and their fittings in a Scandinavian context, and also wrote influential papers on Rus' activity – including warfare – in the East.³⁹

Russian and Ukrainian archaeologists naturally had first hand access to the material. The famous Russian archaeologist, Anatoly Kirpichnikov was the first to publish a catalogue of Rus'ian weaponry based on the available material remains in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ Swords have proved especially attractive, and Sergei Kainov's works in this regard offer the freshest perspectives thanks to rapidly developing natural scientific methods.⁴¹ The same applies to the re-examination of many of the notable warrior graves in Rus'.⁴² Veronika Murasheva's research on equestrian equipment and militarized contexts in Rus' settlements also belong to the list of notables.⁴³

On the textual side, I am unaware of any studies which specifically dealt with viking warfare in the East. Much research has been done, however, on the Rus' *druzhinas*, mainly from a Slavacist point of view, but also incorporating the Germanic background of the institution.⁴⁴ The Varangians have

³⁷ Ture Algot Johnsson Arne, *La Suède et l'orient, études archéologiques sur les relations de la Suède et de l'orient pendant l'âge des Vikings*. Archives d'études orientales 8 (Uppsala: K. W. Appelbergs Boktryckeri 1914); Holger Arbman, "Skandinavisk Handverk in Russland zur Wikingerzeit", *Meddelanden från Lunds Universitets Historiska Museum* 1959 (1960): 110–35.

³⁸ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and Lena Holmquist Olausson, *The Oriental Mounts from Birka's Garrison. An Expression of Warrior Rank and Status*, Antikvarist arkiv, no. 81 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2006); Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Magyar – Rus – Scandinavia. Cultural Exchange in the Early Medieval Period", *Situne Dei* (2009): 47–56.

³⁹ Ingmar Jansson, "Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the Viking Age: the archaeological evidence", in *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit*. Vol. 4. Edited by Düwel Klaus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1987), 773–807; Jansson, "Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import in Skandinavien"; Ingmar Jansson and Evgenij N. Nosov, "The way to the East", in *From Viking to Crusader. The Scandinavians and Europe 800–1200*, eds. Else Roesdahl and David M. Wilson (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 74–83; Ingmar Jansson, "Warfare, Trade or Colonization? Some General Remarks on the Eastern Expansion of the Scandinavians in the Viking Period", in *The Rural Viking in Russia and Sweden*, ed. Pär Hansson (Örebro: Örebro kommuns bildningförvaltning, 1997), 9–64.

⁴⁰ Anatoly Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoye oruzhiye*. Vol. 1. *Mechi i sabli* (Moscow: Nauka, 1966); Anatoly Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoye oruzhie*. Vol. 2. *Kop'ya, sulitsy, boyevyye topory, bulavy, kisteni. IX–XIII vv.* Moscow: Nauka, 1966.

⁴¹ Sergej Yu. Kainov, "Swords from Gnëzdovo", *Acta Militaria Mediaevalia* 8 (2012): 11–25; Sergei Yu. Kainov, "«Bol'shoy» mech iz Chornoy mogily (predvaritel'nyye itogi novogo etapa izucheniya)", in *Zemlya nasha velika i obil'na...Sbornik statey, posvyashchenny 90-letiyu A.N. Kirpichnikova*, ed. S. V. Beletskiy (Saint-Petersburg: Knizhnaya Tipografiya, 2019), 125–39; Sergei Yu. Kainov, "Pogrebeniya s predmetami vooruzheniya Gnozdovskogo nekropolya", in *Gnozdovskiy arkheologicheskiy kompleks. Materialy i issledovaniya*, Vol. 1, ed. Sergei Yu. Kainov (Moscow: Istoricheskiy muzey, 2018), 211–41.

⁴² Stepan Stepanenko (ed.), *A Viking Century. Chernihiv Area from 900 to 1000 AD*, Occasional Monographs Hlib Ivakin Memorial Series, no. 6 (Paris: ACHCBYZ. 2022).

⁴³ Veronika Murasheva, "Kompositgürtel altrussischer Krieger aus dem 10. und dem Beginn des 11. Jahrhunderts", *Eurasia Antiqua* 12 (2006): 353–68; Veronika Murasheva, "«Ia videl Rusov, kogda oni pribyli po svoim togovym delam i raspolozhilis' u reki Atyl'», in *Puteshestvie ibn Fadlana: Volzhskii put' ot Bagdada do Bulgara. Katalog vystavki*, eds. A. I. Torgoev and I. R. Akhmedov (Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom Mardzhani, 2016), 474–511.

⁴⁴ Elena A. Melnikova, "Retinue culture and retinue state", in Elena A. Melnikova: *The Eastern World of the Vikings: Eight essays about Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the early Middle Ages* (Gothenburg: Litteraturvetenskapliga Institutionen, 1996), 61–72; Uwe Halbach, *Der Russische Fürstenhof vor dem 16. Jahrhundert: eine vergleichende*

always been the subject of interest,⁴⁵ but recent research moves towards a deconstruction of the phenomenon for the Early and Middle Viking Age (see below).

This dissertation aims to partially fill this gap of knowledge by examining several aspects of ‘eastern viking’ warfare. The topics listed above in relation to viking warfare are not always easily studied in an eastern context due to the nature of the source material. Certain questions, however, can be posed and the challenges countered with a comparative perspective with the west, multidisciplinary and by illuminating the wider regional context of the phenomena. It is for instance possible to sort Rus’ warfare into various (although often overlapping) categories in order to illustrate the wide-ranging variety in Rus’ warrior experience. During the review of the sources, it became apparent that warfare should not be relegated to the field of military history. Cultural and social change also affected Rus’ warriors and these are the central themes to be explored here: What kinds of tasks Rus’ warriors had (or could) perform, and how did the encounters affect them in a military-cultural, as well as religious sense? What regards as a ‘warrior’, a ‘viking’ or equivalent, is a complicated issue, and warrior identities had multiple layers and meanings in society. Lastly, my sincerest hope is that it will not only be the western viking events which can shed light on Rus’ warfare, but the comparison will serve the other side as well. The similarities and differences between western and eastern viking activity will hopefully reveal that these fields are not separable, and an artificial bi-partite scholarly division of the Viking Age, despite the local variations, is misleading.

The theme of retinues runs through the chapters in various forms, thus we have to take a short tour in the various scholarly terminologies addressing this early medieval socio-military phenomenon, and its Germanic roots, as well as the different concepts associated with the institution.

The retinue – basically a military following of a charismatic leader – is regarded by scholars as one of the cornerstones of early Germanic tribal or kinship-based clan societies.⁴⁶ Whether the institution itself is of Germanic origin, however, is highly questionable on the basis of similar armed followings discernible in early Celtic, Slavic and steppe societies.⁴⁷ It is, therefore, hardly an institution of Germanic ‘ethnic character’, but rather one surfacing in specific socio-cultural

Untersuchung zur politischen Lexikologie und Verfassungsgeschichte der alten Rus’ (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985), 94–110; Petr C. Stefanovich, *Boyare, otroki, družiny. Voenno-politicheskaya elita rusi v X–XI vekakh* (Moscow: Indrik, 2012).

⁴⁵ The standard work was that of Blöndal, but methodologically it outdated by now. Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*; also: Hilda Ellis Roderick Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976); a major reconsideration of the topic: Roland Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz. Bedingungen und Konsequenzen mittelalterlicher Kulturbeziehungen*, Vol. 1–2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

⁴⁶ Malcolm Todd, *The Early Germans*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 28–35; Herwig Wolfram, *Die Germanen* (München: C. H. Beck, 2002), 67–75; Walter Pohl, *Die Germanen*, 2nd ed., *Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte*, no. 57 (München: R. Oldenbourg, 2004), 65–72.

⁴⁷ Heiko Steuer, “Archäologie der Gefolgschaft”, in *2000 Jahre Varusschlacht-Konflikt*, ed. Stefan Burmeister (Stuttgart: Theiss, 2009), 309; Stefanovich, *Boyare, otroki, družiny*, 87–122; Peter B. Golden, “Some notes on the comitatus in Medieval Eurasia with special reference to the Khazars”, *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 28 (2001): 153–70.

conditions. The only truism in this regard is upheld by source preservation, namely that early medieval accounts report mostly about Germanic warbands. The first author to address the phenomenon in detail was the first-century Roman historian, Publius Cornelius Tacitus. In his famous *De origine, situ, moribus ac populis Germanorum*, Tacitus describes an organization called by him as *comitatus* in Latin, a collective of *comes* denoting ‘a body of companions’. The institution, as understood by Tacitus, consisted of young male warriors under the command of a warleader, all competing for personal and common glory in violent campaigns and sacrifice their lives for their chosen leader in exchange for a fair share of booty, lodgings and gifts.⁴⁸

The *comitatus*, as described by Tacitus, became labelled as *Gefolgschaft* (literally meaning ‘followings’) in German scholarship and its existence was extended across time and space to any early medieval Germanic groups ever roaming the continent.⁴⁹ This did not only mean that similar institutions were collected under the umbrella of the same term, but that it became a Germanic characteristic of tribal or clan-based societies from the Chatti and Harii of Tacitus to the vikings of the Icelandic sagas. The institution of the *Gefolgschaft*, therefore extends over a thousand years from the first century to the millennium, which raises several problems.

Accordingly, the discussion concerning the *Gefolgschaft* has been dominated by two factors: on the one hand, whether there was real continuity between the institution from the Migration period up to the Viking Age and the other hand, what were the differences between the *comitatus* and other seemingly similar institutions? Regarding the first question, a radical (although not at all implausible) opinion has been expressed by Hans Kuhn, who argued that historical evidence only allows to talk about the existence of a retinue culture in two periods: the early Germanic period and the Viking Age. Rather than assuming that the *Gefolgschaft* was an inherent Germanic characteristic preserved by the Scandinavians for centuries, Kuhn assumed that the correlation should rather be explained by the similar social challenges these societies faced in different times.⁵⁰

These social challenges are connected to the process of tribalization and state formation. As Walter Schlesinger argued, the development of armed followings was closely connected to the organization of enlarging political units. Schlesinger believed that the roots of the *comitatus* is to be sought within the chief’s household and was organized originally from close-kin groups. When a successful leader

⁴⁸ Tacitus, *Germania*, in *Tacitus, Dialogus, Agricola, Germania*, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. T. E. Page and W. H. D. Rouse (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 282–7; cf. Walter Kienast, “Germanische Treue und Königsheil”, *Historische Zeitschrift* 227 (1978): 265–324; Anne K. G. Kristensen, *Tacitus’ Germanische Gefolgschaft* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1983).

⁴⁹ The term was coined in the nineteenth century. For an overview, see: Christoph Landolt, Heiko Steuer and Dieter Timpe, “Gefolgschaft”, in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Vol. 10., ed. Otto von Friesen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 533–54.

⁵⁰ Hans Kuhn, “Die Grenzen der germanischen Gefolgschaft”, *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte / Germanische Abteilung* 73 (1956): 1–83.

subjugated territories outside the usual boundaries of his own community, men from other (defeated) households flocked under his banner to join ranks with the original (kinship) members. This extended the usual household-lay-out of the leader's armed followings into a broader framework.⁵¹ The process was even deepened (or mutually triggered) by the appearance of fortified places where the population gathered in times of crisis.⁵²

If a warleader led successful campaigns, he could conquer and rule larger political formations, often called tribes. Tribes (in German scholarship *Sippe*) constituted a larger unit in social organization which united several clans. Tribes were (unlike clans or kin-group societies) probably territorial units held together by fictive ties of pseudo-kinship and their development was likely triggered by violence. Beside the opinion of Schlesinger discussed above that tribes and the *comitatus* developed due to offensive campaigns, it is even more likely that there is a defensive reason behind their appearance as suggested by Heiko Steuer. He maintains that tribes were created under the threat of more stratified and developed states and empires in order to form a more coherent opposition.⁵³

Therefore, as most scholars see it, the institution of the retinue is a feature of tribal societies. Even more so, it was an alternative society within the society itself. The *Gefolgschaft* was built up as a family unit based on a fictive connection of blood sanctioned usually by oaths.⁵⁴ In fact, however, members of the *Gefolgschaft* were unrelated by blood as they were mustered from several clans and from foreigners. The retinue in this sense was a catalyst in social development which helped to break down former blood- and kin-based communities and initiated the appearance of a larger and more effective socio-political units.⁵⁵ This could even go further. When several tribes were united and led by a person standing above them (labelled usually as *dux* or *rex* in the sources of the Migration period), the military force of this joint entity unavoidably consisted of men conscripted from several tribes, which may justifiably be called an army. (Of course it is still possible that retinues within an army still functioned under the command of individual leaders.)

Retinues, however, can also be associated with other terms. When they offered their services to empires or developed states, retinues became 'mercenaries' or 'auxiliaries'. This process is well envisaged in the case of the early Germanic *foederatii*, taking service within the Roman Empire, and also with viking warbands pledging loyalty to Frankish lords to fight off other vikings in exchange for land and revenues, but also fit the Varangian guard of the Byzantine emperor and the *druzhina* of

⁵¹ Walter Schlesinger, "Lord and Follower in Germanic Institutional History", in *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe*, ed. Frederic L. Cheyette (New York: Holt, 1968), 64–99.

⁵² Schlesinger, "Lord and Follower".

⁵³ Heiko Steuer, "Warrior bands, war lords and the birth of tribes and states in the first millennium AD in Middle Europe", in *Warfare and society: archaeological and social anthropological perspectives*, ed. Ton Otto et al. (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2006), 227–36.

⁵⁴ Schlesinger, "Lord and Follower", 71.

⁵⁵ Todd, *The Early Germans*, 30–2.

later Rus' princes.⁵⁶ In this context, retinues again lose their original purpose, as within more developed societies – in which these units are strangers in any case – they could not maintain their usual lifestyle whilst their socio-military purpose shifted. Therefore, it indeed seems accurate that the retinue cease to exist in its original form when it becomes part of larger military units, let it be an indigenous unit with a tribal heritage (an army made of tribes) or alien to it (an army of a state).

The other question pertaining to the nature of the *Gefolgschaft* is its uniformity across Germanic culture. Since it became apparent that there was no uniform ruling system among the medieval Germanic people across time and space,⁵⁷ it is now evident that an identical retinue culture in Germanic societies cannot be generalized either. Scandinavian warriors assembled for raids and numbering a crew of a few longships were usually called *lið* in Scandinavian sources.⁵⁸ According to mythological accounts, the viking chief god, Óðinn, assembled in his otherworldly hall a band of followers labelled as *einherjar*.⁵⁹ Thirteenth-century Norwegian and Icelandic sources, however, speak about retinues (also earlier viking retinues) as *hirðs*, which in fact in the thirteenth century denoted a professional bodyguard and spy network of a well-organized Christian monarchy, the Norwegian kingdom.⁶⁰ The elite follower force armed with the characteristic Danish axes and accompanying Knútr *inn ríki* ('the great') (1016–35) to England was known as *húskarls*, literally 'household-men', despite the fact that they were also tasked with administrative duties such as tax farming and land management.⁶¹ In Iceland, even though populated by settlers mainly from Norway, a classical Germanic retinue, feasting and permanently living with his lord and consisting of full-time, professional warriors did not evolve. In the island, local chieftains living from agriculture and farm economy called *goðar* established informal bonds with followers called *þingmenn* ('assembly-men') in which both were bound to protect the other physically and, more importantly, legally during lawsuits at public assemblies.⁶² Leaderless warbands, such as the notorious *Jómsvíkingar* of the eponymous Norse saga would not fit the *Gefolgschaft* either in strict terms since these egalitarian warrior groups, if these later sources are to be treated seriously, had no real leaders to follow other

⁵⁶ Steuer, "Warrior bands, war lords".

⁵⁷ Walter Pohl, "Herrschaft", in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Vol. 14., ed. Johannes Hoops (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 443–57.

⁵⁸ Ben Raffield, Claire Greenlow, Neil Price and Mark Collard, "Ingroup identification, identity fusion and the formation of Viking warbands", *World Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (2016): 35–50.

⁵⁹ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 104–5.

⁶⁰ Jerker Rosén, "Hird", in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformationstid*. Vol. 6, ed. Johannes Brøndsted (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1961), 568–80; Laurence M. Larsson, "The Household of the Norwegian Kings in the Thirteenth Century", *The American Historical Review* 13, no. 3. (1908): 459–79.

⁶¹ Nicholas Hooper, "The huscarls in England in the eleventh century", in *Anglo-Norman Warfare. Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Military Organization and Warfare*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1994), 1–16.

⁶² Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001), 118–41.

than some acting as *primus inter pares* in certain duties. Retinues, therefore, could demonstrate decisive varieties and can be defined according to diverse concepts.

From the above list, it also seems apparent that retinues were not necessarily cultic institutions as previously believed (e.g. based on the case of the *einherjar* and some others), although some kind of ritualized behavior was definitely connected to its membership. Members of the *Gefolgschaft* usually had to pass certain tests, which upon passing granted entry into the organization and acknowledged in front of others with rituals. The leader of a retinue also maintained his position through ritualized feasts and the distribution of prestige gifts usually made out of precious metals (for example armrings and weapons) as most vividly illustrated in the famous Old English epic poem *Beowulf*.⁶³ Some sources even illustrate a more close connection to pagan religious views allowing researchers to connect retinues to cults of warrior gods, mainly that of Wotan/Óðinn.⁶⁴ In this sense, the *Gefolgschaft* is closely connected to the concept of *Männerbund*, an association of males involved in secret activities.⁶⁵ Such a male confraternity was engaged in highly cultic activities destined for a chosen elite. In a Germanic context this manifested itself in ritual dancing, wearing of masks, drinking and performing sacrifices. Archeologists' criteria for identifying physical remains of a *Gefolgschaft* are restricted to identifying princely or kingly burials, feasting halls or ritual depositions.⁶⁶ These are naturally important also in the case of the Rus', but only reflect on the retinues' cultic aspects, distorting our understanding of how a retinue could function outside the ritual world.

As we can observe, the early Germanic retinue can be addressed from various perspectives, reflected in the different terminologies applied to it both by historical sources and modern researchers. The viking scenario should be understood against this background of high variability. For the sake of clarity, the more neutral term 'retinue' will be favored in the following discussions, which is flexible enough to incorporate military contingents of varying nature. As will be illustrated, such a variety is no less reminiscent of warrior groups in the Viking Age East than in the Germanic societies of the Migration period, and has bearing on understanding Rus' social and cultural history. Scandinavian and Rus' warriors taking service in variegated forms in almost all locales of the East, including the Kievan Rus', Poland, Volga Bulgharia, Byzantium, Georgia, Bohemia, Hungary, Khazaria and the Islamic Derbent, endured different conditions in a socio-cultural as well as in military sense.

⁶³ Jos Bazelmans, *By weapons made worthy: lords, retainers, and their relationship in Beowulf* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ Jens Peter Schjødt, "The Warrior in Old Norse Religion", in *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*, ed. Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, and Ian Beuermann, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 269–96; cf. Joseph Harris, "Love and Death in the Männerbund: An Essay with Special Reference to the Bjarkamál and The Battle of Maldon", in *Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing Old Norse Studies*, ed. Susan E. Deskis and Thomas D. Hill (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Library, 2008), 287–317.

⁶⁵ Mischa Meier, "Männerbund", in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Vol. 19, ed. Heinrich Beck (Göttingen: De Gruyter, 2001), 105–10.

⁶⁶ Steuer, "Archäologie der Gefolgschaft".

Vikings, Rus', Varangians

There is a plethora of controversial terms which are frequently used in this dissertation and therefore should be clarified. The first one is *viking*, a word originally denoting 'pirate' or 'raider' in a specific early medieval context.⁶⁷ It is retained here with lower case instead of the traditional upper-case version (*Viking*), in order to emphasize that the expression denotes a certain way of life rather than ethnicity.⁶⁸ Although viking groups mainly consisted of Scandinavians, they were socially and ethnically inclusive entities. However, I retain an upper case for denoting the *Viking Age* as a period and the *Viking world* as the geographical boundaries of known Scandinavian activities in the era.

Other contested terms, which are even more central for the present piece, are *Rus'* and *Varangians*. Scandinavians active in the Baltics, the Russian forest belt, Ukraine, the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean usually appeared as 'Rus' (Gr. *rhós*, Os. *rusi*, Ar. *ar-Rūs* or *rūsiyya*) and from the eleventh century as 'Varangians' (Gr. *varangoi*, Os. *varjagi*, Ar. *warank*) in Byzantine Greek, Old Slavic and Arabic sources. The etymology of the word *Rus'* is still not conclusively established, albeit the Finnish appellation *Routsi* ('rowers') – deriving from the Swedish *rōþer* ('rowing') – attached to Scandinavian crews navigating the Northern waterways on smaller portable ships carried over from river to river, – and aptly describing the main occupation of *Rus'* groups – is a favoured explanation for its roots.⁶⁹ *Rus'* identity, however, is ambiguous inasmuch as the word variously refers to Slavs, Scandinavians, or an amalgamation of ethnic groups in the sources. The origin of the Kievan *Rus'* state and the Scandinavians' role within the formation of *Rus'* ethnic identity was for long in the centre of the 'Normanist-controversy' introduced shortly above.⁷⁰

The term is best situated within modern theories about ethnic identity. As it was put in modern scholarship, ethnicity is rather a practiced and chosen than an inherited identity and was constantly under change and renegotiation.⁷¹ Ethnic groups were not necessarily stable entities resting on the basis of shared cultural norms, language or biological ancestry. They rather developed around emerging power centres or dominant elites of culturally mixed groups brought together by conquest

⁶⁷ Stefan Brink, "Who were the Vikings?", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 5–6.

⁶⁸ Stefan Brink, "Introduction", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.

⁶⁹ Eldar Heide, "Viking—"rowershifting"? An etymological contribution", *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 120 (2005): 41–54.

⁷⁰ Adolf Stender-Petersen, "The Varangian Problem", in Adolf Stender-Petersen: *Varangica* (Aarhus: B. Lunos, 1953), 5–20; Knud Rahbek Schmidt, "The Varangian problem. A brief history of the controversy", in *Varangian Problems. Scando-Slavica Supplementum I.*, eds. Knud Hannestad, Knud Jordal, Ole Klindt-Jensen, Knud Rahbek Schmidt and Carl Stief (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1970), 7–20; Leo S. Klejn, "The Russian controversy over the Varangians", in *From Goths to Varangians. Communication and Cultural Exchange between the Baltic and the Black Sea*, eds. Line Bjerg, John H. Lind and Søren M. Sindbæk (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013), 27–38.

⁷¹ Carter G. Bentley, "Ethnicity and Practice", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987): 24–55.

or common goals in a shared geographical space.⁷² Ethnicity worked as a ‘situational construct’, where the (re)negotiation of common cultural practices and norms (including externalities, laws, beliefs and even language), as well as notions of kinship could be manipulated to forge new identities.⁷³ The term Rus’, similar to ‘viking’, perhaps describes an association or a ‘way of life’, and refers to martial groups incorporating people of varying biological origins engaged in warfare, craft production and long-distance trade along the rivers.⁷⁴ In addition, not all medieval authors, employed the term in the same meaning, and they often adopted earlier historiographical tradition by copying designations without illustrating the changes occurring in the identity of a given group.⁷⁵ Hence, the designation Rus’ should denote a hybrid population of initially predominantly Scandinavian origin including women and children, mixing with the local Slavic, Balto-Finn and Turkic inhabitants of the East, and which in relation to later periods should perhaps better be translated vaguely as ‘northern foreigner’.

Regarding the ethnic connotations of the word Rus’, the Slavic component, at least in the Kievan Rus’ principality, became more decisive over time and sources rather refer to ‘northern foreigners’ as Varangians from the eleventh century onwards.⁷⁶ This slightly different term has a Scandinavian connotation with a reference to professional warrior groups or associations operating in the East as looters, hired mercenaries or bodyguards, and likely derives from the Old Norse compound of *væringi*, literally an ‘oath-taking companion’ or simply ‘retainer’ combining the words *vár* (‘oath’, ‘pledge’, ‘faith’) and *gengi* (‘companion’).⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the term clearly developed only in the eleventh century, and was re-purposed and projected back in time by later medieval authors.⁷⁸ This does in no way rule out that Scandinavian mercenaries were present in various courts of the East during the ninth- tenth centuries, but restrictions with the anachronistic use of the word Varangian is perhaps warranted. In the followings, I will only employ it when it seems relatively safe to assume that ninth- tenth-century Scandinavians were present in situations in which they are described as Varangians by later recordings.

⁷² Walter Pohl, “Conceptions of Ethnicity in Early Medieval Studies”, in *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, eds. Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 13–24.

⁷³ Patrick Geary, “Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages”, in *Writing History: Identity, Conflict, and Memory in the Middle Ages*, eds. Florin Curta and Cristina Spinei (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2012), 1–18.

⁷⁴ Peter B. Golden, “Rūs”, in *ELP*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Dozel, and W. P. Heinrich (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 618–29; Elena A. Mel’nikova and Vladimir J. Petrukhin, “The Origin and Evaluation of the name Rus’: The Scandinavians in Eastern European ethno-political processes before the 11th century”, *Tor* 23 (1990–91): 203–34.

⁷⁵ James E. Montgomery, “Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources”, in *Living Islamic History. Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 151–65.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Shepard, “The Viking Rus and Byzantium”, in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 509.

⁷⁷ Adolf Stender-Petersen, “Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes *væringi*, Russ. *vařag*.” *Acta Philologica Scandinavica. Tidskrift for nordisk sprogforskning* 6 (1931–32): 26–38.

⁷⁸ Jakobsson, *The Varangians*, 63–74, 84–7, 175–6.

Despite the ethnic inclusivity of the terms, the close connections of the Rus' and later Varangians with wider parts of the viking diaspora makes it unequivocal that a considerable portion of this group came from a Scandinavian milieu, or at least shared, and maintained that heritage. Hence the Rus' should be viewed as part of the viking context also visible in the West, rather than in isolation.⁷⁹

The Viking Age history of the Rus' testify to this and should be introduced now for contextual reasons. As noted above, the story of the Viking Age actually also begins in the East. A recent archaeological discovery dramatically altered scholarly judgement on the importance of the East in the course of this formative period of Scandinavian history. The remnants of a Scandinavian raiding or diplomatic party, buried in two boats, were found on the island of Salme, Estonia, on the coast of the Baltic Sea. A revolutionary discovery, the burials at Salme were dated to 750, predating the first recorded viking raids on the English shores with half a century.⁸⁰ Scandinavian settlement in the East did not lack behind either; contemporaneous with the Salme burial, a Scandinavian merchant community contributed to the emergence of an *emporium* in North-western Russia on the shores of Lake Ladoga, a gateway into the interior of the Russian forest belt as well as from there to the Baltics.⁸¹ Further South, near the confluence of the Dnieper and other Northern rivers, another major political-commercial centre, Gnezdovo, also shows traces of Scandinavian settlement. New radiocarbon investigations of tree trunks in the earliest stratigraphic layers of Gnezdovo, radically push back the time of the first Scandinavian presence at the site to the eight century. Remains of Scandinavian clinker-built boats found here, suggest that Scandinavian advancement must have followed the penetration to Staraya Ladoga with only a few decades, although the town only later developed as a commercial-administrative centre.⁸²

Scandinavians, penetrating today's Eastern Europe and the Baltics via the waterways as early as the eight century, have maintained contacts with a wide variety of local people within a geographical area – divided into three ecological zones – which presented new opportunities and challenges. The Northern forests were mostly inhabited by hunter-gatherers of Finnic and Baltic origin and were infiltrated from the South by Slavic agriculturalists expanding towards thinly populated lands. Until

⁷⁹ Oleksiy I. Tolochko, *Ocherki nachal'noi Rusi* (Kiev: Laurus, 2015), 11, 142–9; Jonathan Shepard, "Things, persons and practices in circulation between Byzantium and the British Isles in the Viking Age: a role for Rus'?", in *Goroda i vesi srednevekovoy Rusi: arkheologiya, istoriya, kul'tura: k 60-letiyu Nikolaya Andreyevicha Makarova*, eds. L. A. Belyayev, P. G. Gaydukov, I. Ye. Zaytseva, S. D. Zakharov, N. V. Lopatin, V. V. Sedov, A. N. Fedorina and A. V. Engovatova (Moscow: Drevnosti Severa, 2015), 274–85; Neil Price, *The Children of Ash & Elm: A History of the Vikings* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 400–43.

⁸⁰ Douglas T. Price, Jüri Peets, Raili Allmäe, Liina Maldre and Neil Price, "Human remains, context, and the place of origin of the Salme, Estonia, boat burials", *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 58 (2020): 1–13.

⁸¹ Eduard Mühle, *Die städtischen Handelszentren der nordwestlichen Rus'. Anfänge und frühe Entwicklung altrussischer Städte (big gegen Ende des 12. Jahrhunderts)*, Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des östlichen Europa, no. 32 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991), 19–62; Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 3–49; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 60–98.

⁸² Murasheva, V. V., A. V. Panin, A. O. Shevtsov, N. N. Malysheva, E. P. Zazovskaya, and N. Ye. Zaretskaya, "Vremya vozniknoveniya poseleniya Gnezdovskogo arkheologicheskogo kompleksa po dannym ra diouglerodnogo datirovaniya", *Rossiyskaya Arkheologiya* 4 (2020): 70–86.

the end of the forest-steppe, mostly Slavic tribes, of which around roughly ten are mentioned by name in the written records, lived in dispersed communities. The wooded-steppe and the steppe hosted various pastoralist tribes of mostly Turkic or Iranian descent (*Map 1.*).

There was continuous mass migration from Scandinavia, mainly central Sweden and only a lesser extent from Gotland, to the Baltics and North-western Russia from the mid-eighth and ninth centuries onwards, which not only involved pirates, chieftains, mercenaries, traders and craftsmen but also women.⁸³ In a famous piece, *Why the Vikings first came to Russia?*, the American numismatist, Thomas S. Noonan, pointed out that the region was a golden mine of furs and slaves, highly desired commodities which Scandinavians could exchange for other sought-after products: Arabic silver dirhams.⁸⁴ The driving forces behind the Scandinavian activities and settlements in the East has recently been also connected to the construction of infrastructural networks inevitable for complex resource gathering, crafts production and trade.⁸⁵ There are still debates whether settlements in the region developed by the need of agricultural hinterlands of the local populations or by favourable natural conditions at the confluence of rivers and lakes, exploited by Scandinavian warrior-merchant elites as ideal locations for developing infrastructures around commercial *emporia*.⁸⁶ Many of these settlements, such as Rurikovo Gorodische, reachable from Lake Ladoga on the River Volkhov, Gnezdovo on the upper Dnieper, Pskov on the shores of the Northern Dvina, or the connected cluster of settlements in the later Jaroslav-Suzdal region (most importantly Timerovo, Mikhailovskoe, Petrovskoe and Sarskoe Gorodsiche) came to life, or alternatively started to prosper, due to the appearance of the Scandinavians. They served either as station points or strongholds facilitating and supervising long-distance trade conducted towards the South. South from there, traces of Scandinavian settlement can only be found in the tenth-century layers of Kiev and its surrounding settlements, Chernigov, Shestovitsa, Vishygorod, and others (*Map 2.*).⁸⁷ The southernmost supposed Rus headquarter could have been in Tmutarakan, on the Northern shores of the Black Sea, although

⁸³ Jansson, “Warfare, Trade or Colonization?”; Anne Stalsberg, “Scandinavian relations with Northwestern Russia during the Viking Age: the archaeological evidence”, *JBS* 13, no. 3 (1982): 267–95; Anne Stalsberg, “The Scandinavian Viking Age finds in Rus’: Overview and Analysis”, *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission* 69 (1988): 448–71.

⁸⁴ Thomas S. Noonan, “Why the Vikings first came to Russia?”, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 34, no. 3 (1986): 321–48.

⁸⁵ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, “Interactions and infrastructure – driving forces and organisation behind the Viking Age trade networks in the Baltic and beyond”, in *Iron and the Transformation of Society. Reflexion of Viking Age Metallurgy*, ed. Catarina Karlsson and Gert Magnusson (Stockholm: Jernkontoret, 2020), 187–222.

⁸⁶ Evgenij N. Nosov, “The emergence and development of Russian towns: some outline ideas”, *Archaeologia Polona* 32 (1994): 185–96; Tamara Pushkina, “Viking-period pre-urban settlements in Russia and finds of artefacts of Scandinavian character”, in *Land, Sea and Home. Settlement in the Viking Period*, eds. John Hines, Alan Lane and Mark Redknap (Maney: Northern Universities Press, 2004), 41–53; Hedenstierna-Jonson, “Interactions and infrastructure”, 202–10.

⁸⁷ For these settlements, see: Nikolaj A. Makarov (ed.), *Die Rus’ im 9.–10. Jahrhundert. Ein archäologisches Panorama*, Studien zur Siedlungsgeschichte und Archäologie der Ostseegebiete, no. 14 (Kiel: Wachholtz – Murmann Publishers, 2017).

its early existence is hypothetical as no archaeological traces show Scandinavian settlement there, and written sources only point to a late-tenth-century Rus occupation.⁸⁸

Scandinavian Rus' groups remained very much comparable in terms of social and political structures to those of homeland Scandinavia. European Russia, Belarus and the Baltics at this time was also a stage of conflicting chieftains and petty-kings merging with their subjects. From the written records, a fragmented territory with competing groups of Rus' emerges.⁸⁹ Princes known from the chronicles as *knyaz* only monitored parts of this vast territory, and their 'realms' could hardly stand up to the definition of a state. The term is on par with the Scandinavian *konungr* and thus most of the Rus' warlords would deserve to be called kings,⁹⁰ a title, however, with no omnipotence, but one easily to be challenged by ambitious men in Scandinavian societies. Rus' leaders, such as the dynasty founder Rurik, as well as *knyaz* Oleg (c. 882–912) and Igor (c. 914–45) were warlords of Scandinavian origin, as their native names Hrærikr, Helgi and Yngvarr make it doubtless.⁹¹ Scandinavia was the place where other competing warlords of the East, such as Askold and Dir, Rogvolod of Polotsk and Tury of Turov, also originated. The turbulent confrontation between local centres and outside groups is also confirmed by archaeological investigations of settlement layers of Rus' towns (e.g. Staraya Ladoga, Pskov, or Rurikovo Gorodische) showing that they occasionally were burned to the ground.⁹² Major campaigns as well as smaller raids were also led in the East by the Rus' during the Viking Age, and it is hard to determine exactly which Scandinavian or Rus community executed these attacks.⁹³ From these various groups and settlements, the Kievan Rus' polity only slowly and unconsciously became crystallized during the tenth century.

Despite its dominating tendency, the Scandinavian elite, in the occupied settlements, lived jointly with other ethnic groups. Cemeteries and graves, building and craftworking techniques, as well as artefacts of various cultural backgrounds mix in these settlements, all suggesting that Scandinavians formed a single community with the natives.⁹⁴ The polyethnic patterns of settlements are already

⁸⁸ O. B. Bubenok, "Koly Tmutarakan' stala volodinnyam Rusi?", *Knyazha doba: istoriya i kul'tura* 10 (2016): 69–76.

⁸⁹ Thomas Noonan, "Scandinavians in European Russia", in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 149–50; Jansson, "Warfare, Trade or Colonization?", 21–5; Tolochko, *Ocherki nachal'noi Rusi*, 111, 151–5, 175–6.

⁹⁰ Christian Raffensperger, *The Kingdom of Rus'* (Amsterdam: ARC Humanities Press, 2017).

⁹¹ Elena Mel'nikova, "Igor", in *Drevnyaya Rus' v srednevekovom mire. Entsiklopediya*, ed. Elena A. Mel'nikova and Vladimir J. Petrukhin (Moscow: Lodomir, 2014), 313–4; Elena Mel'nikova, "Oleg", in *Drevnyaya Rus' v srednevekovom mire. Entsiklopediya*, ed. Elena A. Mel'nikova and Vladimir J. Petrukhin (Moscow: Lodomir, 2014), 571–3; Elena Mel'nikova, "Ryuryk, Syneus, Truvor," in *Drevnyaya Rus' v srednevekovom mire. Entsiklopediya*, ed. Elena A. Mel'nikova and Vladimir J. Petrukhin (Moscow: Lodomir, 2014), 702–4.

⁹² Johan Callmer, "From West to East. The Penetration of Scandinavians into Eastern Europe ca. 500–900", in *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, ed. Michel Kazanski, Anne Nercessian and Constantin Zuckerman, *Réalités Byzantines*, no. 7 (Paris: Éditions P. Lethielleux, 2000), 75.

⁹³ Irina G. Kononova, "Pokhod Svyatoslava na vostok v kontekste bor'by za «khazarskoye nasledstvo»", *Stratum plus* 5 (2000): 231–2; Tolochko, *Ocherki nachal'noi Rusi*, 151–5.

⁹⁴ Mühle, *Die städtischen Handelszentren*, 44, 58, 208, 250–1; Jansson, "Warfare, Trade or Colonization?", 144; cf. Pushkina, "Viking-period pre-urban settlements in Russia", 51.

visible from the earliest stages of the Scandinavian infiltration into Staraya Ladoga and even early Gnezdovo.⁹⁵ Only one detached, purely Scandinavian cemetery could be identified; the tenth-century Plakun cemetery of Staraya Ladoga.⁹⁶ That Scandinavian Rus' warrior elites incorporated other ethnic groups should not be surprising as such inclusiveness was the norm elsewhere in the Viking world as well.

Nevertheless, in spite of being eclectic in ethnic terms, Rus' groups were just as integral parts of the viking diaspora as their western counterparts. All the above-mentioned proto-towns and trading posts were intricately linked to the Scandinavian homelands, most importantly the Swedish commercial centre of Birka emerging around 750 in Lake Mälaren, which vigorously joined the eastern trade networks from the end of the ninth century.⁹⁷ The other central hub of the eastern connections of Scandinavia was on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, where the largest concentration of oriental coin hoards appears.⁹⁸ Other Scandinavian ties of Rus' settlements, based on object typology and ornamentation, can be established with the Jelling centres in Denmark.⁹⁹

Support is rendered to this interconnectedness by visits of four Norwegian kings to the Kievan Rus', a Rus' *knyaz* who was on exile in Scandinavia and another who won the Kievan throne by recruiting people there.¹⁰⁰ Norwegian and Icelandic travellers, pilgrims, kings, mercenaries and traders venturing in the East are frequent characters in Icelandic sagas and are mentioned in Scandinavian runestones.¹⁰¹ Other sources, such as the eleventh-century Thietmar of Merseburg's pick on runaway Danes in Kiev,¹⁰² and the seals of the ninth-century Byzantine Emperor Theophilos (829–42) found in Tissø, Hedeby and Ribe, demonstrate contacts between West and East in diplomatic and military levels.¹⁰³ The Icelandic *Laxdæla saga* involves a slave woman acquired by raiders in Ireland and finally sold to an Icelander by a Rus' named Gilli in Norway.¹⁰⁴ This is another

⁹⁵ Murasheva et al. "Vremya vozniknoveniya poseleniya", 81–2.

⁹⁶ Kirill A. Mikhajlov, "A Scandinavian cemetery at Plakun (notes on its geography and topography)", *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 32, no. 3–4 (2005): 419–32.

⁹⁷ Björn Ambrosiani, "Eastern connections at Birka", *Viking Heritage Magazine* (2001): 3–7.

⁹⁸ Jacek Gruszczyński, Marek Jankowiak and Jonathan Shepard (ed.), *Viking-Age Trade: Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, no. 3 (New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁹⁹ e.g. Daniil Avdusin and Tamara A. Puškina, "Three chamber graves at Gnezdovo", *Fornvännen* 83 (1988): 20–33; Androshchuk, "Chernigov et Shestovitsa, Birka et Hovgården", 263.

¹⁰⁰ Henrik Birnbaum, "Yaroslav's Varangian Connection", *Scando-Slavica* 24, no. 1 (2008): 5–25; Tatjana Jackson, *Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas* (Amsterdam: ARC Humanities Press, 2019), 115–70.

¹⁰¹ Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, 193–233; Sverrir Jakobsson, "On the Road to Paradise: 'Austrvegr' in the Icelandic Imagination", in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature. Sagas and the British Isles: preprint papers of the 13th International Saga Conference Durham and York, 6th–12th, August, 2006.*, ed. Donata Kick, David Ashurst and John McKinnel (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 935–43; Jackson, *Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas*.

¹⁰² Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, ed. Robert Holtzmann, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum Nova Series, no. 9 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1935), 531.

¹⁰³ John Lind, "Tissø – Kiev – Konstantinople: Danske netværk i øst?", in *Vikingetidens aristokratiske miljøer*, eds. Henriette Lyngstrøm and Lasse Christian Arboe Sonne (Copenhagen: Saxo Institute, 2014), 69–76.

¹⁰⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Laxdæla saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, no. 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 23–4.

oft-quoted and vivid example of how intricately the trade networks between West and East were linked.¹⁰⁵ These networks already existed in the last decades of the ninth century as evinced by the appearance of fragmented dirhems and hacksilver in the viking site of Woodstown (near Waterford) in Ireland.¹⁰⁶ Scabbard chapes with embellishments of falcons, the emblem of the Rus', reach as far as the famous viking burial of Île de Groix in France.¹⁰⁷ The number of these scabbard chapes is growing. Six new stray-finds have been identified in England by Cat Jarman,¹⁰⁸ who further stresses contacts between the remote ends of the viking diaspora. Jarman traces the far-reaching connections of the ninth-century Viking Great Army, which, on the basis of a carnelian glass bead could even extend to as far as the Indian ends of the Silk Roads in Gujarat. An identical carnelian bead was found in the Rus stronghold of Vypozvyv, illustrating the networks through which objects reached the North from the Silk Roads.¹⁰⁹ A Rus'ian brooch pin, a Permian ring and several Arabic dirhams held in possession of the Great Army in Repton and Torksey are similar mementoes of far-reaching networks.¹¹⁰ Closing dirhems in the Torksey winter camp were minted between 866–868 in Merv or al-Shash, indicating that not all Muslim coins landed in England with the Great Army in 865, but were brought in by later reinforcements. Movement between the western and eastern diasporas, therefore were extremely swift.¹¹¹ As these endeavours show, fluctuation of people, news, ideas, knowledge and material culture between East and West was probably more common than hitherto held. The Rus' were integral part of the viking phenomenon.

Another significant issue concerns the connections of the Rus' with neighbouring Turks, steppe people or nomads. It is one of the recurring themes in the present work and a short note is desirable on related terminology. The territories settled by the Scandinavians, were, from the South and the South-East, surrounded by the steppe, flat plains where forests appear in patches. Scandinavian activities in the East were inherently linked to the lake and river systems of the territory. These waterways meant the sole passable option in the dense forests of North-western Russia, but they were also the main transportation routes across the open steppes. Availability of supplements, food and drinking water, as well as safe oases of islands where ships could be repaired and supplies uploaded warranted travellers to prefer the river system over the land routes. Contrary to the communities

¹⁰⁵ Shepard, "Things, persons and practices".

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Shepard, "Rus and other Northmen under non-Arabic eyes", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. Jonathan Shepard and Luke Treadwell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 255–6.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Renaud, *Les Vikings en France* (Rennes: Ouest-France, 2000), 67; Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Rus', Varangians and Birka warriors", in *The Martial Society. Aspects of warriors, fortifications and social change in Scandinavia*, eds. Lena Holmquist Olausson and Michael Olausson (Stockholm: Archaeological Research Laboratory Stockholm University, 2009), 169–75.

¹⁰⁸ Jarman, *River Kings*, 252–3.

¹⁰⁹ Jarman, *River Kings*, 1–7, 228–30.

¹¹⁰ Jarman, *River Kings*, 1–8, 55–67, 105–6, 291–8; Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards, *The Viking Great Army and the Making of England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), 42, 95, 97–9, 115, 214–5.

¹¹¹ Shepard, "Rus and other Northmen", 257.

dispersed in the fragmented and hardly traversable forest belt, on the vast flat area of the steppe sometimes centralized polities of extensive scale came to life. These larger groupings, including states or tribes interacted with smaller political units based on kinship, as well as with the sedentary world, in a dynamically changing arena of political co-operation and struggle. The major power on the Ponto-Caspian steppe in the period between the seventh and tenth centuries was the Khazar polity controlling subjugated people of the Don-Volga areas from varying origin, including the Burtas', Alans and many others (temporarily). The Middle Volga-Kama region was controlled by an equally important actor, the Volga Bulghar tribal union fulfilling a significant role as a middleman in the transit trade between Asia and Northern Europe from the tenth century onwards. Western and eastern banks of the Volga served home to the Turkic Bashkir and Oghuz' nomads, respectively, as well as Pechenegs remnants during the tenth century. The Dnieper region was held by the tribes of the Magyars in the initial stage of Rus' presence in the East, until pushed out by migrating Pecheneg tribes arriving from the Volga area. Ousting the Magyars before them and forcing them to leave to the Carpathian Basin in 895, the Pechenegs became the main political force on the Pontic steppes during the tenth century (*Map 1.*).¹¹²

One of the variant umbrella terms, which will occur frequently in the followings for these polities and people is the designation 'Turkic'. As a linguistic category, it unfortunately excludes the Iranian speaking Alans and the Finno-Ugric Magyars from the enumeration. It is more useful as a cultural marker, alluding to cultural practices brought from Central Asia and prevalent in the steppes. 'Steppe people' is also a problematic hallmark as the Volga Bulghars, Bashkirs and the Burtas' already lived deep in the wooded-steppe, which implies a need for a combination of the lifestyles of two different ecological zones. The last regularly employed term is 'nomadic', which is usually applied in the forthcoming sources to people living in tents and yurts, practicing large-scale pastoralist animal husbandry and who migrate seasonally together with their herds. Nomadic, however, is a broad term and most of the Viking Age polities of the steppe had a more complex economy, in which pastoralism and a pastoralist population only formed one segment. Many of these people, most notably the Khazars, Volga Bulghars and Alans, for instance, owned permanent settlements, built fortifications, monitored agricultural communities and extended their income with taxes and tolls from foreign merchants. Inconsistency in scholarly terminologies is due to this miscellaneous palette of social, political and economic variation within steppe communities.¹¹³

¹¹² For a comprehensive overview on the history of these, see: Benjamin P. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples. Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992).

¹¹³ On all these, see with further references: Csete Katona, *Vikings of the steppe. Scandinavians, Rus' and Turkic world (c. 750–1050)*, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, no. 4 (London: Routledge, 2022), 29–35.

Chapter 2

Sources and methodology

The dissertation depends on a multi-disciplinary analysis of contemporary Muslim, Byzantine and Latin, as well as retrospective Old Slavic and Old Norse written sources. These will be contrasted to or amended with archaeological evidence and be interpreted within a comparative framework with analogies drawn from the Viking world and the eastern regions. It is worth reviewing the sources briefly according to categories. The written and archaeological evidence builds on already published material. Except Persian, I have attempted to use all sources in the original source languages. Source editions will go unreferenced in the present review as they will be found in corresponding parts of the manuscript.

Muslim sources

Contemporary accounts on the Scandinavian Rus' derive largely from Arabic and Persian historical and geographical works. Building on earlier traditions of Greek, Indian and Persian geographical knowledge, Islamic scholars during Abbasid times invented something akin to 'human geography'. This genre cannot be delineated as a separate science in the sense of the modern days, as it incorporates scientific observations (of various disciplines) with travelogues and also histories of the regions of Islamic lands and their border zones.¹¹⁴ These works often have a viewpoint of keen inspection of the outside world, something akin to modern anthropological descriptions, although obviously without following a systematic representation or well-worked out methodology.

Regarding the source value of these accounts, *pro* and *contra* arguments can both be formulated. On part of the pros, one could highlight that several of the early Muslim writers served state purposes by reporting on the lands of Islam and its surroundings, thus their accounts rarely tend to misguide the reader as the intended audience was the Islamic courtly elite. In addition, many of the classical 'geographical' authors bear witness to a change in epistemological attitude towards scientific data by emphasizing direct observation and personal experience. Acquiring knowledge through travelling became a fitting method of scientific inquiry, while condemning previous armchair historians, who

¹¹⁴ The two most useful summaries are still: Ignatij Julianovich Krachkovskiy, *Izbrannye sochineniya. Vol. IV. Arabskaya geograficheskaya literatura* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1957); and André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle: Géographie et géographie humaine dans la littérature arabe des origines à 1050*, Civilisations et Sociétés, no. 7 (Paris: Mouton, 1967). A fresh, but less detailed account is: Jean-Charles Ducène, *L'Europe et les géographes arabes du Moyen Âge (IX^e-XV^e siècles). « La grande terre » et ses peuples. Conceptualisation d'un espace ethnique et politique* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018); for a shorter summary: J. F. P. Hopkins, "Geographical and Navigational Literature", in *Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*, eds. M. J. L. Young, J. D. Latham and R. B. Serjeant, The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, no. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 301–27.

gathered their information from books.¹¹⁵ Despite this sound methodology, however, even the keenest observers scanned the outside world through their own cultural filters and terminology. They distorted indigenous customs of non-Islamic people, employed stereotypes and expressed their views through an autocentrist perspective.¹¹⁶ Also, even widely travelled authors consulted previous works which sometimes led to an uncritical copying of the material, making it hard for the researcher to distinguish between misnomers and the different chronological layers of the information in later accounts. What we know about the authors of individual works is not much, and mostly derives from the works themselves. It is also apparent that all authors grew up in different political and ideological environments and received different education. Codicological problems (manuscript divergencies) also present themselves in the study of Islamic geographical literature.

The information Muslim sources contain on the Scandinavians and Rus' have been treated extensively by scholars.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, in case of particular accounts, there is no agreement on the clarity of the designation Rus' as pertaining to ethnicity, despite the fact that Arabic sources mostly separate it from another ethnic term, *Ṣaqāliba*, a common designation for the Slavs.¹¹⁸ This uncertainty is connected to the nature of the sources themselves since none of the Muslim authors from the Eastern Caliphate ever visited Scandinavia; the furthest to get was Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān who only reached the Middle Volga area. In contrast, Muslim authors' awareness of the steppe region was on firmer grounds, although naturally falling into the fallacies alluded to above.

Source critical issues will come into light in detail during the analytical chapters, but a short introduction of the most important writers is necessary here. The first more elaborate mention of the Rus' in Arabic sources comes from the *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-'l-mamālik* (*Book of Roads and Kingdoms*) of Ibn Khurradādhbih, the officer of the Baghdad postal system. The work was originally written in 850 and revised some thirty years later. In it, a curious itinerary of Rus merchants is presented, however, the passage was in the cross-fire of philological and manuscript related debates.¹¹⁹

The bulk of the source material related to the history of the steppe region and the Rus' come from two corpus of geographical treatises, both going back to lost individual works. The first group of works builds on the early tenth-century compilation of the Persian vizier of the Samanid Empire, Abū

¹¹⁵ Paul L. Heck, *The Construction of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 94–8.

¹¹⁶ Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Barbarians in Arab Eyes", *Past and Present* 134 (1992): 3–18; Nizar F. Hermes, *The [European] Other in Medieval Arabic Literature and Culture: Ninth-Twelfth Century AD* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

¹¹⁷ Harris Birkeland, *Nordens historie i middelalderen etter arabiske kilder* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1954); James E. Montgomery, "Arabic sources on the Vikings", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 550–61; Þórir Jónsson Hraundal, *The Rus in the Arabic sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity*, Ph.D dissertation (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2013).

¹¹⁸ Carsten Goehrke, *Frühzeit des Ostlaventums* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992), 124–7.

¹¹⁹ See in detail the works of Pritsak, Bulgakov and de Goeje in Chapter 3.

‘Abdallāh al-Jayhānī, whose lost work, under the same name as that of Ibn Khurradādhbih’s, describes conditions in the territory of mostly today’s Eastern Europe in the ninth-century. Later copyists used his material extensively, such as the Samanid traveller, Aḥmad ibn Rusta, in his *Kitāb al-A‘lāq al-naḥṣah* (*Book of Precious Objects*) dated between 903–913. However, it has been argued that since Jayhānī was vizier between 914–22, Ibn Rusta could not be quoting him, thus the so-called ‘Eastern European dossier’, which we believe was part of Jayhānī’s compilation should actually be an ‘Anonymous Relation’.¹²⁰

Other works building on the ‘Anonymous Relation’ (or Jayhānī) include the anonymous Persian world geography roughly translatable as *Regions of the World*, but most widely known on its original name as the *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, composed in 982. The list goes on with the Persian Abū Sa‘īd Gardīzī’s *Zayn al-akhbār* (*The Ornament of Histories*) from the eleventh-century, and an eleventh-century Muslim author from Al-Andalus, Al-Bakrī’s dictionary of incomprehensible foundings (*Mu‘jam mā ‘ista‘jam*). The ‘Arab Herodotus’, Abū ‘l-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī also consulted Jayhānī’s material when writing his *Murūj ad-Dahab wa-Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar* (*Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Stones*), finished in 934, on the history of the Abbasids.¹²¹

The other important cluster of sources are called the al-Balkhī tradition. The tradition, named after the Khorasanian geographer Abū Zayd Aḥmad al-Balkhī (d. 934/954?), is a reworking of lost commentaries made to a world map. The first to deal with this material is Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Iṣṭakhrī (d. 961), who followed tradition in naming his book as that of the *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-‘l-mamālik* (*Book of Roads and Kingdoms*). Another contemporary copyist was Abū ‘l-Qāsim Ibn Ḥawqal (d. c. 988?), who personally met al-Iṣṭakhrī and decided to revise his work. The result was that Ibn Ḥawqal preserved details of history which al-Iṣṭakhrī omitted. The most sophisticated follower of al-Balkhī was Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī (d. after 988), whose *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma‘rifat al-aqālīm* (*The Best Divisions in the Knowledge of the Regions*) provides invaluable details on contemporary commercial traffic.

Probably near contemporary to the events is a Persian work called *Ta’rīkh Bāb al-abwāb* (*The History of Derbent*), written by an anonymous Arab writer probably in the eleventh-century and preserved in the later work of the Ottoman writer Münejjim-bashī. It supplies valuable information on the Rus’ in the Islamic lands from the end of the tenth century.

Other authors, who produced their works later, but might have been building on former well-informed intelligence also mention the Rus’. A thirteenth-century Iranian historian, Bahā’ al-Dīn

¹²⁰ Jean-Charles Ducène, “Other Arab geographers’ sources on the north: The ‘Anonymous Relation’ and al-Jayhani”, in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. Jonathan Shepard and Luke Treadwell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 71–6.

¹²¹ A detailed study on the tradition is: István Zimonyi, *Muslim Sources on the Magyars in the Second Half of the 9th Century. The Magyar Chapter of the Jayhānī Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Muḥammad b. Ḥasan ibn Isfandiyār, compiled his *Ta'rikhi Tabaristan (History of Tabaristan)* from earlier records and mention several Rus' raids in the region. The same applies to an Arab geographer, Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī, completing his work entitled *Cosmographie* in 1300.

Besides these, other individual authors also supply important information on the Rus'. Probably by far the most well-known is the Arabic diplomat, Ibn Faḍlān, who upon his return from a mission issued to the Volga Bulghar court in 921–2 by the Baghdad caliph Al-Muqtadir (908–29), wrote down his sojourn along the lands of the steppe to the mid-Volga capital of the Bulgars where he encountered the Rus'. There is immense literature on the credibility and problematics of his ethnographic-style report on the people and events he describes.¹²² For a time, his work was only known through excerpts preserved in the thirteenth-century lexicon of the Islamic scholar Ibn Yāqūt but later a more perfect manuscript was discovered in Mashhad and published by Zeki Validi Togan.¹²³ There is, however, a chance that later copyists, such as the sixteenth-century Safavid geographer, Amīn Rāzī might have been working from an edition that was even more elaborate than the Mashhad text.¹²⁴ The work of Ibn Faḍlān was renamed *Risāla* by Yāqūt only, thus should be referred to as *Kitāb* instead.¹²⁵

Miskawayh, a Persian philosopher and historian who said to live an exceptionally long age (ca. 930–1030), is the foremost authority on the appearance of the Rus' in the Caspian Sea around the mid-tenth century, which he describes in his book, the *Tajārib al-Umam (Experiences of Nations)*. As a chancery official and librarian of various viziers, he had access to primary materials, knowledgeable informants and also eyewitnesses when compiling his history, making his observations on the Rus' one of the most detailed among Islamic historiographers.

There are other Islamic scholars, who provide essential information. One of these is the Iranian polymath, Abū al-Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, working in the eleventh century. He mostly worked in the intellectual circles connected to the Ghaznavid court, where historians – al-'Utbī, Gardīzī, Bayhaqī, also were aware of the activities of the Rus' in the early eleventh century.

¹²² Just a few attempts at deconstructing parts of his narrative: James E. Montgomery, "Pyrrhic Scepticism and the Conquest of Disorder: Prolegomena to the Study of Ibn Fadlan", in *Problems in Arabic Literature*, ed. Miklós Maróth (Pilisbaba: The Avicenna Institute of Middle East Studies, 2004), 43–89; James E. Montgomery, "Travelling Autopsies: Ibn Fadlan and the Bulghar", *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7, no. 1 (2004): 3–32; for further studies on him follow: Travis Zadeh, "Ibn Faḍlān." In *El³*, eds. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (Brill Online, 2017), 121–8.

¹²³ Zeki Validi Togan, *Ibn Fadlan's Reisebericht* (Leipzig: Kommissionsverlag F. A. Brockhaus, 1939).

¹²⁴ A Swedish edition of his work: Stig Wikander, *Araber, Vikingar, Varingar* (Lund: Svenska Humanistiska Förbundet, 1978); a critical view on Amīn Rāzī: Tonicha Upham, "Keeping Abreast of Foreign Fashions: Rationalizing Rūs Brooches in a Sixteenth-Century Persian Version of Ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla*", *Medieval Encounters* 28 (2022): 72–103.

¹²⁵ Luke Treadwell, "From *Kitāb* to *Risāla*. The long shadow of Yaqut's version of Ibn Fadlan's account", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, eds. Jonathan Shepard and Luke Treadwell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 52–3.

Works by later medieval authors will be sometimes referenced to provide analogies for issues discussed in relation to the region. One of the important ones in this regard is Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, whose *Al-suyūf wa-aynāsuhā* (*On swords and their kinds*) was written between 833–842. Besides these key texts, sporadic references to other authors, who are less important for the present purposes, will occur throughout the text, and will be addressed in context.

Byzantine sources

The other most important cluster of contemporary documents about the Rus' and steppe people are found in Byzantine historical works. In terms of historiography, the tenth century presented a new wave of interest for historical writing in Byzantium, greatly surpassing the previous one hundred years. A new narrative style also emerged, centred around an individual rather than chronology as was the fashion previously. This new style of rhetoric makes the modern historian's work harder, as it blurs facts with heroic scenes or constructed dialogues. Despite these cursory tendencies, Byzantine historiography was developed along the personal styles of individual authors rather than along genre clichés.¹²⁶ The historical value of these works is immense, since with the loss of imperial archives they basically form the backbone of information on political events in the Empire.

Historical works present ample data on the Scandinavians and Rus', which received much attention from researchers.¹²⁷ Regarding our case, these are the only contemporary documents to corroborate the Muslim sources and to supplement their accounts. Despite their usefulness, the Byzantine sources are not without fallacies in terms of source criticism. In accordance with classicizing Greek and Roman heritage, they often substitute foreign peoples' names with classical ones. The Magyars for instance are equated with the 'Turks' in Byzantine works, whilst the Rus' became 'Tauroscythians' and the Slavic tribe of the Drevljanes, 'Germans'.¹²⁸ They also tend to generalize ethnographic details and are embedded with classical *topoi*, whilst at the same time must

¹²⁶ Athanasios Markopoulos, "Byzantine History Writing at the End of the First Millenium", in *Byzantium in the Year 1000*, ed. Paul Magdalino, The Medieval Mediterranean. Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400–1500, no. 45 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 183–97; Anthony Kaldellis, "The corpus of Byzantine historiography. An interpretative essay", in *The Byzantine World*, ed. Paul Stephenson (London: Routledge, 2010), 211–22; Stephanos Efthymiadis, "Byzantine history-writers and their representation of history", in *Chronicon. Medieval Narrative Sources. A chronological guide with introductory essays*, eds. János M. Bak and Ivan Jurković (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 69–79.

¹²⁷ Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Dimitri Obolensky, "The Byzantine Sources on the Scandinavians in Eastern Europe", in Dimitri Obolensky: *The Byzantine Inheritance of Eastern Europe* (London: Variorum, 1982), 149–64; Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*.

¹²⁸ Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica. Die Byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvölker*, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 303, 320–7; Hans Ditten, "Zu Germanoi = Drevljane in Leon Diakonos' Gesichtswerk VI 10", *Byzantinoslavica* 45, no. 2 (1984): 183–9.

also be subjected to textual criticism, as most authors copied from previous chroniclers and the origin of specific passages might determine the authenticity of the information.¹²⁹

Due to the individualistic character of each work, a short review of the period's authors is necessary.¹³⁰ In the mid-tenth century, it was Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (945–59) and the circle around him which produced two immensely informative accounts, which regularly mention foreigners in and around the Byzantine Empire. One of these, is the *De administrando imperio* (henceforth: DAI), a didactic book for the son and successor of Constantine, the later Romanos II (959–63). The book was put together by the Emperor and/or educated men under his supervision between 948 and 952, although parts of its information derive from earlier periods. The DAI discusses diplomatic and external relations of the Empire with foreign powers and people, and offers guidance to a young prince how to handle affairs with cunning policy. Among the people surrounding the Empire, the work is specifically concerned with the inhabitants of the Pontic steppes, its nomadic people, such as the Khazars, Magyars and Pechenegs, as well as the Rus'. It is largely regarded as authentic: its sources come from intelligence reports, oral stories told by foreigners, foreign ambassadors visiting the Byzantine court, official documents and eye-witnesses. Problematic is, however, the work's chronology; most of its information is impossible to date precisely and likely refers to various stages of the early- or mid-tenth century.¹³¹ The other account, commissioned by Constantine slightly later than the DAI (probably around 956–9), is a ceremonial book on Byzantine court culture (*De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*), most often referred to simply as the *De cerimoniis*. The work addresses Byzantine religious festivals, courtly practices and customs, together with sporadic mentioning of foreign people on official duties in Constantinople, such as nomadic and Rus' mercenaries and guards, and the visit of the Rus' princess, Olga.

Another mid-tenth-century author is Leo Diaconus, a chronicler whose *Historia* is closely associated with the *Synopsis historiarum* (*Synopsis of histories*) of a later author, the eleventh-century Joannēs Skylitzēs. The two authors share a common, although in several details distinct, account on the Bulgarian campaigns of Joannēs I Tzimiskēs (969–76) against the Rus'. The relation of the two texts is crucial for the evaluation of their passages on the Rus' and their nomadic allies. For a while it was thought that Leo was an eyewitness in the campaign and Skylitzēs copied Leo's

¹²⁹ Jakov Ljubarskij, "Quellenforschung and/or Literary Criticism. Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writing", *Symbolae Osloenses* 73, no. 1 (1998): 5–22.

¹³⁰ A useful summary is found in: Warren Treadgold, *The Middle Byzantine Historians* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

¹³¹ James Howard-Johnston, "The *De administrando imperio*: a re-examination of the text and a re-evaluation of its evidence about the Rus'", in *Les centres proto-urbain russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, eds. Michel Kazanski, Anne Nersessian and Constantin Zuckerman (Paris: Éditions P. Lethielleux, 2000), 301–36; Elena A. Mel'nikova, "Rhosia and the Rus in Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos' *De administrando imperio*", in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, eds. Fedir Androshchuk, Jonathan Shephard and Monica White, *Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia*, no. 16 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2016), 315–36.

work, and supplied additional information, unfound in the *Historia*, by imagination. Now it became more likely that both authors were building on a common source and in accordance with their agenda saved or omitted certain passages.¹³² Since they were both building on an eyewitness description, their works, after cleansing them from classical and heroic *topoi*, complement each other well.¹³³

We have to mention the texts of the so-called Byzantine-Rus' peace treaties, concluded after the Rus' attacks against Byzantium in 907, 911, 944 and 971. The Byzantine originals of the treaties are missing, but they were preserved in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* in Old Church Slavonic (see below). Although that is the only existing version of the texts, the phrasing and the structure of the treaties make it undisputable that the Slavic versions are translations of a Greek original.¹³⁴ The legal instructions in the text are clearly paralleled in Scandinavian law and thus the authenticity of the documents is assured in relation to customs, norms and legal matters.¹³⁵

There are other contemporary authors who also talk about either Rus' or nomadic attacks against the Empire, or mention these people in Greek service. To this category belongs Theophanes the Confessor's *Chronicle* covering events until 813, and the anonymous writer continuing his work until 961 and who is subsequently labelled as Theophanes Continuatus. Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century, has lamented in two letters about the devastation of Rus' attacks against the Empire at the time. The hagiographic writing of eighth-ninth-century saint, George of Amastris' life, also mentions an early Rus raid, but the account was only written in the tenth century. Short notice of Rus' in Byzantine service is mentioned by eleventh-century sources, such as George Cedrenus' *Synopsis historion*, a military manual compiled by a probably Georgian-Armenian author whose family name was Kekaumenos and an anonymous annal compiled in Bari (*Annales Barenses*). These sources, not being part of elaborate discussion, will nevertheless provide trustworthy chronologies for political events (as said foreign attacks and services) which concern the Scandinavian Rus'.

Old Norse-Icelandic sagas

¹³² Anthony Kaldellis, "The original source for Tzimiskes' Balkan campaign (971 AD) and the emperor's classicizing propaganda", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 35–52.

¹³³ Stamatina McGrath, "The Battles of Dorostolon (971): Rhetoric and Reality", in *Byzantine Warfare*, ed. John Haldon (London: Routledge, 2007), 347–62.

¹³⁴ Jana Malingoudi, *Die russisch-byzantinischen Verträge des 10. Jhds. aus diplomatischer Sicht*, Vivliothēkē Slavikōn meletōn, no. 5 (Thessaloniki: Vaniias, 1994).

¹³⁵ Martina Stein-Wilkeshuis, "A viking-age treaty between Constantinople and northern merchants, with its provisions on theft and robbery", *Scando-Slavica* 37 (1991): 35–47; Martina Stein-Wilkeshuis, "Scandinavians swearing oaths in tenth-century Russia: Pagans and Christians." *Journal of Medieval History* 28 (2002): 155–68; cf. John Lind, "The Russo-Byzantine Treaties and the Early Urban Structure of Rus'", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 62, no. 3 (1984): 362–70.

A smaller portion of the written material consists of Old Norse literary texts. The Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, or ‘stories’ as the word itself indicates, are heroic late-medieval tales narrated in prose with occasional intersections of poetry. Icelandic sagas are, thus, literary works recorded from the thirteenth- fourteenth centuries. Their plots usually take place in ancient times: mainly in the Viking Age or in the even older Scandinavian and Germanic world. In parallel with the spread of chivalric literature, however, other types of saga genres were also developed, which chronicled events of later periods.

Sagas that tell the stories of the Viking Age were written down only a good two to three hundred years after the actual events (mostly by anonymous clerics), who either added their own imagination to the events preserved by oral tradition or changed them for political reasons. In compiling the works, the authors often drew from other Latin or Old Norse sources. The sagas are therefore by no means a reflection of the past, but rather the children of oral tradition and literary ambition.

Consequently, their usefulness for historical research has been a matter of debate from the beginning to the present day. Scholars who argue that the sagas cannot be used as historical sources regarding the Viking Age or even earlier periods point out that these works are not contemporaneous with the events, they are primarily literary works and they view the past through a medieval, Christian filter. Nevertheless, despite the literary distortions, these Viking Age elements preserved by oral tradition seem to be usable for historical studies – when strict source criticism is applied – since they contain a wealth of information on the social structure and customary law of the Viking Age, which had changed very little by the time the sagas were written down.¹³⁶

According to their subject matter, sagas can be divided into sub-genres, between which the boundaries cannot always be clearly defined. The Icelandic *Íslendingasögur* (‘Family sagas’) which deal with historical themes, and the *konungasögur* (‘Kings’ sagas’) which depict the deeds of Norwegian kings, deal with important events of Icelandic and Norwegian social and public history. The latter were mostly submitted to us by Snorri Sturluson around 1230 in his *Heimskringla*. Aside these, a few of the *fornaldarsögur*, the so-called ‘legendary sagas’, like *Örvar Odds saga* will be addressed in detail. The *fornaldarsögur* tell heroic stories of the legendary past that is fading into obscurity, are of less historical value.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Milman Perry Collection, 2004), 123–250, 305–9; Lars Lönnroth, “The Icelandic Sagas” in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 304–10; Helgi Þorláksson, “Hvað er blóðhefnd?” in *Sagnaping, Helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum, 10. apríl 1994*, eds. Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrun Kvaran and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1994), 389–414; Paul Bibire, “On Reading the Icelandic Sagas: Approaches to Old Icelandic Texts”, in *West over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement before 1300; a Festschrift in Honour of Dr Barbara E. Crawford*, eds. Beverley Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor, and Gareth Williams (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 3–18.

¹³⁷ For a general overview on the genres with further detailed references, see the following volumes of studies: Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (eds.), *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell,

Although all types of sagas contain a large number of fabulous elements, as well as chronological and natural geographical inaccuracies, it is the latter two genres that could be compared to historical fiction. For a long time, scholars considered these works to have been written for pure entertainment, and this view seemed to be supported by the fact that the texts also include a myriad of trolls, dragons and other unearthly monsters that get in the way of the glorious Scandinavian heroes. However, it has now become clear that even these stories are important sources of mental and ideological history regarding the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries or even earlier periods, and thus scholarly interest in them has increased considerably in recent decades.¹³⁸

This book joins those studies which in certain aspects regard sagas as containing enlightening material both for the history of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe during the Viking Age.¹³⁹ Political events in the sagas are not taken at face value (unless confirmed by other sources), and their stories are mostly to tincture the argument. However, when alike accounts on the basis of analogies allow, saga episodes will be presented as ‘potentially believable’, regardless whether the events actually occurred exactly as described in the narrative or not.¹⁴⁰ Another possible method to employ this material is to read the archaeological evidence of the Viking period analogically with saga accounts. This approach is yielding fruitful results since the last decades.¹⁴¹

Icelandic tales with an exclusive setting in the eastern regions are more frequently referenced. None of the sagas deserves a thorough treatment in the analysis, nevertheless, some feature more frequently than others. Two of the most important ones belong to two quite different sub-genres; these are *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar* (*The Tale of Eymund Hringsson*), which is a short-story incorporated into larger sagas, and *Yngvars saga víðförla* (*The saga of Yngvarr the Far-Traveller*), a legendary account of a trip to the mysterious East. Both sagas were written down in the fourteenth century. Despite their flaws of literary conventions and borrowings, both contain a serious element of historical truth, which is not only supported by other historical documents, or in the case of *Yngvars*

2005); Margaret Clunies-Ross (ed.), *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹³⁸ Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2002); Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen (eds.), *Fornaldarsagaerne, Myter og virkelighed. Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum 2009); Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson (eds.), *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Developments* (Reykjavík: Iceland University Press, 2012).

¹³⁹ E.g. Galina Glazyrina, “Information about Eastern Europe in Old Norse sagas and its adaptation for the Nordic audience by saga-authors”, in *The Eighth International Saga Conference, Göteborg 11–17 August 1991. The Audience of the Sagas*. Vol. 1, ed. Lars Lönnroth (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1991), 123–31; Jackson, *Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas*.

¹⁴⁰ Vésteinn Ólason, “The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature with Special Reference to its Representation of Reality”, in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Cluney Ross*, eds. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnout: Brepols, 2007), 27–47.

¹⁴¹ E.g. Neil Price, *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Ph.D dissertation (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2002); see also the works of Price, Raffield and others in corresponding parts.

saga by archaeological evidence in the forms of runic inscriptions, but are offering details unprecedented in other sources.¹⁴²

Sporadic mentions will be made to saga episodes dealing with traveling and experience in the ‘East’, found in *Orkneyinga saga*, *Magnússona saga*, *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, *Snegluhalla þáttir* (short stories usually incorporated into sagas), *Laxdaela saga* and *Örvar Odds saga*. Apart from the common theme of the episodes, only the style of writing connects these accounts, as they cover diverse sub-genres of saga writing and were composed in different times from the late twelfth- to the fourteenth centuries. Very similar is the diversity in terms of genre with thirteenth-century sagas occasionally hinting at pre-Christian pagan practices: *Hákonar saga Góða*, *Kormáks saga*, *Egils saga Skallgrímsonar*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Guta saga*. Religious rituals and customs recorded in these might have been known by later Christian saga authors from previous oral tradition, and despite possible distortions or misinterpretations unlikely to have survived as pure fantasies.

Even though literary in nature and later in recording, many of these sagas is in consilience with other multiple lines of evidence, gained from other (external) contemporary and less-biased sources. With all that said in mind, saga accounts are secondary to the investigation but will serve as analogies or as background pictures for understanding the events in the East. These will help to decipher problems witnessed in the East related to issues of customs and religions, as well as the identity of warrior groups.

Other sources

Discussions about early medieval Rus’ are usually built on the picture inherent in the so-called *Povest’ Vremennykh Let* (henceforth: PVL) or the *Tale of the Bygone Years*, more commonly known as the *Russian Primary Chronicle*. The PVL, written in Old Church Slavonic, describes the beginnings of the Kievan Rus’ polity and the history of its dynasty, the Rurikids. Although opinions on the exact dates of its composition and composer vary, it can be safely said that its first versions were produced in the beginning of the twelfth century likely by a monk in the Kievan monastery.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Robert Cook, “Russian History, Icelandic Story, and Byzantine Strategy in Eymundar Þáttir Hringssonar”, *Viator* 17 (1986): 65–89; Jonathan Shepard, “Yngvarr’s expedition to the east and a Russian inscribed stone cross”, *Saga-Book* 21 (1984–85): 222–92.

¹⁴³ Oleksiy Tolochko, “Christian Chronology, Universal History, and the Origin of Chronicle Writing in Rus’”, in *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200)*, ed. Ildar H. Garipzanov, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, no. 26 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 205–27; A. Aleksey Gippius, “Vor und nach dem Načal’nyj svod: Die altrussische Anfangschronistikals Gegenstand der textkritischen Rekonstruktion”, in *Die Rus’ im 9.–10. Jahrhundert. Ein archäologisches Panorama*, ed. Nikolaj A. Makarov, Studien zur Siedlungsgeschichte und Archäologie der Ostseegebiete, no. 14 (Kiel: Wachholtz Murmann Publishers, 2017), 44–70.

The PVL, however, is not a chronicle in the sense of its medieval counterparts in this genre as it does not exist independently. The *Primary Chronicle* as we know it today, is a product of scholarly reconstructions, based on different existing or assumed chronological layers in later medieval manuscripts. The earliest manuscript of the PVL is dated to 1377. This is called the Laurentian copy, on which most modern editions are based, as opposed to the other most determinative Hypatian redaction from around 1425.¹⁴⁴ The most noteworthy work done on the textual traditions of the PVL was that of Shakmatov's, a Russian philologist of the early twentieth century, in whose shadows chronicle research still lives. The versions deriving from these traditions differ in wording,¹⁴⁵ but Shakmatov believed to reconstruct the earliest layers (mostly based on the Novgorodian versions of the chronicle), which according to him go back as far as the 1030s. It is acknowledged that some earlier annalistic traditions must have existed in Kiev before the compilation began, but there are fierce debates on the significance of this, and Shakmatov's views are recently questioned by many.¹⁴⁶ The main reasons of the debate are over the source value of the early reports of the PVL. The chronicle is constructed annalistically, i. e. discusses events year by year, but sometimes contains very little or no information on certain years. From Grand Prince Vladimir's (978/980–1015) years onwards its history becomes more reliable but for the ninth and tenth centuries, its information, apart from the aid from some Byzantine control sources, are hard to verify and therefore assume a semi-legendary character. Shakmatov's reconstructions incite a debate because the earlier compositions (if existed) would back up the early stories of the PVL, as they are credited to earlier sources in the possession of the Kievan writers. Oral stories about the arrival of the Varangians, the customs of the East Slavic tribes and the deeds of the early princes of the Kievan Rus' would be closer to the actual events and would not necessarily be dismissed as later fabrications. Some, however, doubts the picture of the PVL so much that omits to use it for the early centuries in total and argues that the history of the Rus' should be written completely without the chronicle.¹⁴⁷ It is true that its chronology (which adopted Byzantine time reckoning but failed to reconcile this with the different dates of starting a year) is largely unreliable. The chronology of the PVL is adjusted to the known Byzantine-Rus peace treaties and the ruling years of early Rus' princes are constructed symmetrically.¹⁴⁸ In spite of these justful reservations, I believe that the PVL as a major narrative source for the period cannot be dismissed

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Alan Timberlake, "The Redactions of the Primary Chronicle", *Russkii jazyk v nauchnom osveshchenii* 1 (2001): 196–218.

¹⁴⁵ Donald Ostrowski, David Birnbaum and Horace G. Lunt (eds.), *The Pověst' vremennykh lēt. An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁶ Mari Isoaho, "Shakmatov's Legacy and the Chronicles of Kievan Rus'", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian & Eurasian History* 19, no. 3 (2018): 637–48.

¹⁴⁷ A. A. Romenskiy, "Nachal'naya Rus' bez nachal'noy letopisi: novyy vitok spora o ranney istorii Vostochnoy Yevropy", *Maiask* 9 (2017): 541–52.

¹⁴⁸ Tolochko, *Ocherki nachal'noi Rusi*, 49–68.

without discussion and is reasonably based on oral informants.¹⁴⁹ Unfortunately, concerning certain events it is our only source for the period and cannot be disregarded totally. Its information naturally has to be handled critically; in chronological matters other sources are given preference in the followings. For the early events until the reign of Vladimir, the PVL's narratives will be confronted with other types of evidence and accepted as reliable if external sources show the same pattern. Archaeology sometimes also has a say in discrediting or crediting the PVL and can refine its details. As it will be shown, even if some of its information stands alone, the chronicle's description matches the reconstructed trends of Scandinavian Rus' interplay with other people in the region.

Among the unique sources, we should mention the collection of the Khazar-Hebrew correspondence. Between 950 and 960, an exchange of letters took place between Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut, a minister of the Cordovan caliph 'Abd al-Raḥmān III (912–61), and Khagan Joseph, ruler of the Khazars. They discussed the Jewish faith and Byzantine relations of the Khazars. Belonging to the same collection is another (anonymous) letter called after its founder as Schechter-letter, which was addressed to Shaprut and tells about a Khazar-Rus' war of the tenth century. There were debates in scholarship about the authenticity of the letters, but today it is accepted that they are not forgeries as believed previously.¹⁵⁰

Latin sources, which occasionally refer to Scandinavians or the background of the investigated issues, have no shared roots comparable to the previous categories discussed above. These documents were recorded in various times and places, and their genres are just as miscellaneous ranging from contemporary western annals, letters and chronicles to retrospective narrative sources.

Annals can obviously also express prejudice towards foreign people regarded as not or less civilized, and confuse or generalize their descriptions. Nevertheless, they are recorded year by year with the intention of informing their own cultural milieu about significant events. Many of these mention Scandinavians, Rus' and steppe people either in relation to political events or customs. Such a principal source for the late ninth century is the *Annales Bertiniani*, a late Carolingian Frankish annal written in the abbey of Saint Bertin which is the first written account mentioning the Rus'. Another source containing sporadic information on the Rus' is the early-eleventh-century *Annales Hildesheimenses*, an anonymous Latin prose written by several Hildesheim authors, some of whom were clerics.

Valuable sources are contemporary (or near contemporary) chronicles produced in diverse places, such as Liutprand's (bishop of Cremona) *Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana* based on his visit

¹⁴⁹ Timofei V. Guimon, *Historical Writing of Early Rus (c. 1000–c. 1400) in a Comparative Perspective*, East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450, no. 71 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 7–8, 44, 92, 106–19, 149–70, 315–7.

¹⁵⁰ See the introduction in: Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew documents of the tenth century* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1982).

and experience in the Byzantine court, or Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* written in the 1070's, while bishop of Merseburg (1012–8), a German cleric, Thietmar, produced a *Chronicon*, which became a chief source for eleventh-century politics and contain invaluable information not found elsewhere.

Later chronicles will be also discussed, although naturally less trust is put to their arguments as they mostly have to be matched with contemporary information in order to be verified. Some of these chronicles were born with the rise of literacy in the peripheries of Europe and relate the history of a 'nation' (in the medieval sense of the term). In Hungary, two thirteenth-century writers wrote a *gesta* of the Hungarians: P. dictus magister (usually called Anonymous) and Simon of Kéza. Similar is Saxo Grammaticus' Danish history, *Gesta Danorum*, finished in the beginning of the thirteenth century. The Saxon priest, Helmold also wrote a chronicle of the Slavs (*Chronica Slavorum*) in the twelfth century. Similar is the case with the work called *Dormitio Cyrilli* a thirteenth-century re-telling of the life of Saint Cyrill on the basis of earlier Pannonian legends and other lost recordings. A chronicle of England, *Estoire des Engleis* (written in French), was composed by the Anglo-Norman chronicler, Geffrei Gaimar in 1136–40 building on previous written sources. It accounts about Danes travelling between distant parts of Europe, including East.

In a few cases, other high medieval sources providing analogies of later steppe people, such as the Cumans or the Mongols, also feature, such the Cistercian chronicler, Alberic of Trois-Fontaines' *Chronica Albrici Monachi Trium Fontium* from 1251 (written in Latin), the great French chronicler's, Jean de Joinville's *Life of St. Louis* (*Livre des saintes paroles et des bons faiz de nostre saint roy Looÿs*) written between 1305 and 1309, or the monumentary travel notes by Afanasy Nikitin, a fifteenth-century Russian traveller from Tver about his journey to India between 1466–72 during which he crossed parts of the steppes. Peculiar in its use of comparison is an earlier work, the world-wide known description of Herodotus on the Scythians written in Classical Greek in 430 BCE.

As apparent, these accounts are only relevant in minor issues and will be restricted to short notes relevant to the wider significance and relatedness of Scandinavian and Rus' history. References to these works accompany the investigation throughout and issues related to their historiographical traditions will be addressed in due place if needed.

The archaeological evidence

Lastly, the archaeological material merits to be briefly addressed. Data from this discipline is increasingly growing, and the Scandinavian involvement in the eastern affairs is impossible to understand without this. Some key aspects should be highlighted. Coins, found in Scandinavia in abundant numbers and reflecting contacts, of course are of primary importance, although their

evaluation will be left to specialists. Objects will receive the outmost attention in the followings, as they, also directly testify to contacts between different cultures. Most importantly weaponry, attire, everyday objects, riding equipment and crafting techniques of Scandinavian (and steppe) origin will be discussed. However, methodologically speaking they cannot be evidently linked with ethnic identities as it became increasingly clear in theoretical literature,¹⁵¹ as well as in specific relation to the ‘Normanist question’ addressing the identification and role of Scandinavians in European Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.¹⁵² The lion’s share in the discussion will be shared by interpretations of graves of culturally mixed furnishings and rituals in light of the critical theories of ethnic identities; steppe objects exhibiting the signs of Nordic metalwork techniques, or traditionally Scandinavian artefacts manufactured in steppe styles and fashion. Objects of far-away provenance in designated areas of traditionally Scandinavian or steppe inhabitation have to feature too. In this sense, the approach is quite widely extended in the case of the eastern connections of the Scandinavians. Scandinavian archaeologists, gathering material from the East applied a vague term to this horizon of objects: ‘oriental’. The term was attacked due to its patronizing connotations,¹⁵³ however the substitute term, ‘eastern’ is still very broad. This arises from the fact that steppe cultures were transmitters of Islamic and other cultural traits, which makes it impossible to delineate in some cases whether an object should be regarded concretely as of ‘Khazarian’ provenance such as objects of the Saltovo-Mayaki culture, or for instance ‘Volga Bulgharian’ or ‘Islamic’, a problem most apparent in the case of dress and jewellery. Nevertheless, it is quite secure that the steppe polities were the middlemen in the transmission and diffusion of these items to the North, and their own culture also merited from more eastern traditions, as for instance from earlier Sassanidan art. Thus ‘eastern’ or ‘oriental’ influence was inescapably involved in the historical contacts of Scandinavians and Turks.

The integration of material culture and written texts will follow up on the basic methodology of historical archaeology. Archaeology can fill in gaps in our knowledge based on laconic references in the texts. Archaeological and written evidence are also useful as empirical control sources for the veracity of the other. The material is sometimes in direct confrontation with the texts, which helps reevaluating the conformity suggested by some of the written records. Often, the material culture is not filling in lacunae but is ‘expanding the text’ and by this advancing the discussion with new data.

¹⁵¹ Just some notable examples across a large geographical and timespan: Heinrich Härke, “Material Culture as Myth: Weapons from Anglo-Saxon Graves”, in *Burial and society. The chronological and social analysis of archaeological burial data*, eds. Claus Kjeld Jensen and K. Højlund Nielsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1997), 119–27; Florin Curta, “Some remarks on ethnicity in medieval archaeology”, *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2007): 159–85; Guy Halsall, “Ethnicity and Early Medieval Cemeteries”, *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval* 18 (2011): 15–27.

¹⁵² Jansson, “Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, 775–9; Sebastian Brather, *Ethnische Interpretationen in der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie. Geschichte, Grundlagen und Alternativen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 279–83; Charlotta Hillerdal, “Vikings, Rus, Varangians. The “Varangian Problem” in view of Ethnicity in Archaeology”, *Current Swedish Archaeology* 14 (2006): 87–108.

¹⁵³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

In such an overview of a large historical problem, usually no specific methodology is presented, as it applies the principles of basic historical (re)construction: What kind of evidence has been preserved about the investigated issue? How much of this evidence is reliable? And how it really was? The methodology, therefore, confines to traditional methods of historiography, where the source value of various accounts are measured in contrast to each other, and the picture (re)constructed is widened with as much available evidence as possible. Later sources are usually used to tincture the argument, or accepted when they fit the contemporary records. Nevertheless, some of the sources will require a closer reading based on their terminologies, semantics or authorial intentions and misunderstandings.

One feature, which is recurring in this book, needs, however a short explanation. In case when further evidence is missing or taciturn comments need a wider illumination in order to understand their meaning, we must turn to analogies. In this dissertation analogies will be drawn from two different pools of evidence. One concerns the archaeological and written evidence of the western Viking world, the other the eastern regions, most importantly Central Asia and the steppes. Both will help explain phenomena related to Rus' warfare. The burning question is naturally always: how far an analogy stands? In case of the first scenario, I start from the assumption that the Rus' elite maintained a Scandinavian heritage for long. In addition, similar social structures, the interconnectedness of the western and eastern viking spheres and the widely acknowledged Scandinavian pedigree of the early Rus' make a good case for comparison.

The case with the second scenario is somewhat more complicated. The question of continuity or discontinuity of certain customs is not always straightforward since societies change and become unique in their own stance. In the study of the steppes, the use of analogies perhaps receives the most widespread application. There are two factors which necessitates this. Firstly, most of the Scandinavians, Rus' and steppe people in our period did not possess extensive own written records and most information were transmitted to us by outsiders. Thus, there is a relatively short corpus of evidence about their inner cultural and social world. The other reason for turning to analogies perhaps more often than in other fields of medieval studies, concerns the unique geographical, economic and social circumstances of the region. For instance, even though obviously being shaped by their neighbours and the sedentary world in various degrees, nomadic organization (with scattered communities, few permanent settlements and moving livestock) was conservative and rarely focused on technological innovations other than the ones concerning the improvement of animal husbandry. Although allowing for local variations, nomads in the steppes lived almost the same way throughout the centuries and their lifestyle conserved certain social and cultural features for long. This is the reason why belief systems, cultural habits and warfare can demonstrate long-lasting continuities in

steppe communities. Earlier or later records on nomadic people, therefore often allows a comparison with our period if there is reason to suspect continuity in certain issues.

Chapter 3

Warrior-merchants

Peter Sawyer's pioneering study, *The Age of the Vikings*, was the first to call attention to trade apart from violence ("destruction, rape, plunder and murder") as the other prime underlying motivator of the Viking Age.¹⁵⁴ His work triggered a change of focus in the thinking of later generations of scholars, who subsequently concentrated on more peaceful facets of the period. Yet, Sawyer readily admitted that trade and the viking raids were not always separable within the wider context of the era. As an example, he brought up the reappearing Scandinavian attacks on Æthelred's England (c. 980–1020), which were probably urged by the cessation of Islamic silver flow through Russia and the Baltics to Scandinavia.¹⁵⁵ Thus, trade relations in the 'East' seem to have directly influenced raids in the 'West'. Such a large-scale correlation of events in remote parts of the viking world are amongst the most precious conclusions a researcher can draw. I will attempt to present a similar correlation, albeit more modest in nature, in the current chapter as well. The road there, however, as will be seen, leads through a meticulous discussion of information crumbs gained from miscellaneous sources.

Trade had an inseparable connection to warfare in the eastern viking/Rus' sphere. When contrasted to the experience from the western Viking world, it reveals striking similarities and of course noteworthy differences (as any comparative study should). The most evident link between trade and warfare is recognizable in the mechanisms of contemporary slave trade. How vikings from Scandinavia engaged in the enslavement of the certain groups in the East and beyond, and how this activity was interlinked with a lucrative trade system (yielding thousands of Islamic silver coins) is recently in the forefront of scholarly endeavours.¹⁵⁶ Here, I will confine myself to add only nuances to this well-studied picture in the first part of the chapter, and only when it serves my purpose; namely to illustrate the similarities of these engagements with those of the western viking events, and to demonstrate that violence was ubiquitous along the 'Eastern Road' and trading activities were not peaceful enterprises.

There is another concrete topic which contains a potential of lessons for not only the history of the Rus', but the whole viking world in general. This is the arms trade, most importantly the production and selling of swords, in case of which the relation between warfare and trade could not be more

¹⁵⁴ Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 5.

¹⁵⁵ Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 6.

¹⁵⁶ See for instance: Jacek Gruszczyński, Marek Jankowiak and Jonathan Shepard (eds.), *Viking-Age Trade: Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, No. 3. (London: Routledge, 2020); Ben Raffield, "The slave markets of the Viking world: comparative perspectives on an 'invisible archaeology'", *Slavery & Abolition* 40, no. 4. (2019): 682–705; Marek Jankowiak, "What Does the Slave Trade in the Saqaliba Tells Us about Early Islamic Slavery?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. (2017): 169–72; Mary Valante, "Castrating Monks: Vikings, the Slave Trade and the Value of Eunuchs", in *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Larissa Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 174–87. On other works on slavery, see the chapter entitled *Slave soldiers*.

evident. Among the main articles of trade flowing from the hands of the Rus' to the eastern markets, slaves loom largest in the literature. Apart from slaves, it is only furs which are allowed to be mentioned on an (almost) equal footing regarding value and importance.¹⁵⁷ Swords never enter the 'top list' of highly profitable merchandise worth dealing with in the East, and merit brief mentions in this regard; they usually are relegated to a set of 'additional products' – alongside honey, wax, walrus tusks, hawks and others – the Rus' were trading with. Although it has never been articulated clearly, this lack of discussion on swords invites the impression that it was a mere 'side-track' of a more highly profitable business. This is only justified from the viewpoint that we know little about the sword trade from the written sources; its volume and raw materials, the swords' production and prices, as well as the concrete exchange of said items remains mostly opaque in contemporary accounts. However, it should be kept in mind that the correlation between the slave trade and the thousands of Islamic silver coins found in the Baltics, Poland, Russia and Scandinavia is an arbitrary scholarly construction, even if a sensible one. Swords were expensive too in the Early Middle Ages,¹⁵⁸ and no doubts their trade could facilitate considerable income. By this, I do not mean to elevate the yields of sword trade to an equal footing with those of the slave and fur trade, however, but to call attention to a lack of focus in modern scholarship.

As far as I am concerned, Rus' sword trade in particular has not been specifically addressed in detail. This is in stark contrast to what has been written on weapon trade in the West.¹⁵⁹ Thus, there is time for a short (re)assessment of the eastern written evidence. For now, I aim to provide a chronological refinement of the sword production and trade system of the Scandinavian Rus'. I depart from a discussion of the oft-complicated chronological layers of Muslim sources mentioning Rus' swords from the ninth century onwards up to the eleventh (with only a minor elusory to the twelfth century). The chapter is structured accordingly, i. e. alongside the main reports. In spite of their extremely brief nature, the reports' chronology reveals a development in the production, use and trade of Rus' swords. I would like to illuminate the developments in a comparative perspective, because only when the fragmentarily (re)constructed picture from the East is pasted into the larger puzzle of the Viking Age, the data starts to 'make sense'. Findings relating to the western Viking world will suggest, that this chronology fits the sequence of events and phenomena in the West. Additionally, I aim to contrast the corpus of available evidence by integrating the archaeological material into the discussion. Sword finds in Russia and Ukraine has an extensive Russian, Ukrainian and international

¹⁵⁷ See the previous footnote.

¹⁵⁸ Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450–900* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 174–5.

¹⁵⁹ See the works of Arbman, Solberg, Martens, Müller-Wille and Steuer later in the section: *Swords from "the farthest reaches of the Saqlaba"?*

research history,¹⁶⁰ and thanks to newly developing archaeometrical and archaeometallurgical methods it will probably have the final say in the matter.

My main hypothesis is that the sword trade reached its peak in the East in the 980s, a curious date in the global perspective of the Viking world as this is the time when the silver from the Samanid territories to Scandinavia starts to dry up, and as seen above might have affected western events. If the hypothesis is correct, it raises a further fundamental question: why the 980s? What was happening at this time that prompted the development of sword industry and a booming trade? After all, in the turbulent time of early state formations, it was not only about ‘dirhems and slaves’.

Warrior-merchants

Vikings were traders and raiders alike. These social and professional roles were not separated in Viking Age Scandinavian society, as individuals could engage in any of these activities according to actual goals. No independent merchant class existed and most of the male society consisted of arm-bearers. The two activities could also be associated through practical needs: Scandinavians first must have explored external lands in peaceful circumstances as traders before launching marauding expeditions. The first western raids were not random operations, but aimed for undefended and lucrative – thus carefully selected – targets, such as monasteries and settlements. Spying on England in the guise of merchants most probably preceded viking raids of the late eighth century there, as shown by bits of evidence for earlier interaction between the locals and the Scandinavians.¹⁶¹ In the East too, the first recorded attack in 860 against Byzantium was most probably preceded by commercial missions and diplomatic delegations, sometimes accused of spying.¹⁶² However, the general view holds that Scandinavian activity in the ‘East’ was rather characterized by settlement and the organization of long-distance trade than by traditional viking activity and raids.¹⁶³ Although the number of recorded operations might have been fewer than in Western Europe, this was by no means a less violent world and mercantile activity was conjoined with warfare in the East.

First of all, one, if not the only, occupation of Scandinavians was an involvement in the slave trade. It has long been accepted that the main source of slaves throughout the medieval period was taking war captives.¹⁶⁴ The Rus’ indeed launched slave taking raids in the forest belt of today’s Baltic, North-western Russia and Belarus to make a living, and took their captives to the slave markets of the

¹⁶⁰ See the works of Kirpichnikov, Androshchuk and Kainov in corresponding parts.

¹⁶¹ Clare Downham, “The Earliest Viking Activity in England?”, *English Historical Review* 132, no. 554 (2017): 1–12.

¹⁶² Shepard, “Photios’ sermons on the Rus attack of 860”, 115–6.

¹⁶³ Stalsberg, “The Scandinavian Viking Age finds in Rus’”; Noonan, “Scandinavians in European Russia”, 135; cf. also Jansson, “Warfare, Trade or Colonization?”; see also: Ellis, “Remembering the Vikings”, 8.

¹⁶⁴ Janel Marie Fontaine, *Slave Trading in the British Isles and the Czech Lands, 7th–11th Centuries*. Ph.D. dissertation (King’s College London: Department of History, 2017), 106–10.

nomadic world, from where they were forwarded to the Byzantine and Islamic buyers.¹⁶⁵ The frequency of these Rus' raids should not be underestimated in comparison to those of the viking raids in the West as will be discussed in a later chapter.

That the exploitation of local communities was a regular part of Rus' lifestyle still in the mid-tenth century is reinforced by Emperor Constantine's DAI. The Byzantine work takes notice of recurring annual cruises of the Rus' elite (called *poliudia* in Greek) among the Slavic tribes of the Vervians, Drugovichians, Krivichians and Severians in winter time.¹⁶⁶ The collection of tribute was the ultimate goal of these princely tours as illustrated by lively scenes of the PVL in the case of prince Igor's greed to extract too much from the Slavic Drevljans, ultimately leading to his murder.¹⁶⁷ The furs and (most likely) slaves, together with foodstuffs, levied from subjugated tribes then entered the trade market and were fuelled in spring time to Constantinople. Constantine speaks of Rus' commercial fleets dragging slaves in chains for six miles round one of the barrages of the River Dnieper on which Rus' traders descended south towards the Byzantine capital.¹⁶⁸ One could hardly escape the impression that this whole description is a more elaborate version of the same routine recorded by the 'Anonymous Relation' half a century before, the only difference being that the slaves are transported to Byzantium rather than to the Khazarian and Volga Bulgarian markets. The Rus' way of life was governed by warfare and trade simultaneously and inseparably. Weights and scales unearthed from Rus' graves are often paired with weapons, suggesting that the Rus' elite was personally involved in transactions of trade or the taking of tribute.¹⁶⁹

Combining violence with commerce while on campaign is a recently accentuated hallmark of viking forces operating in the West. New research conducted on the Great Viking Army of England and those operating in Frankia along the Seine, Somme and Loire, characterizes them more as 'mobile societies' rather than mere fighting units and highlights their shifting modes of acquiring wealth.¹⁷⁰ Just to simply offer one example, a viking force expelled by Charles the Bald (843–77) from Angers in 873, requested (as part of the peace treaty with the West Frankish king) to stay in the land until February and hold a market on an island of the Loire where they were headquartered.¹⁷¹ Similar

¹⁶⁵ BGA I–7, 145; Hansgerd Göckenjan and István Zimonyi (eds.), *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter. Die Ġayhānī-Tradition*, Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica, no. 54. (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2011), 81–2, 180, 234, 253.

¹⁶⁶ DAI 62–3.

¹⁶⁷ PVL 26–7.

¹⁶⁸ DAI 60–61.

¹⁶⁹ Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoye oruzhiye*, 24; Jonathan Shepard, "Shestovytsya revisited", in *A Viking Century. Chernihiv Area from 900 to 1000 AD*, ed. Stepan Stepanenko, Occasional Monographs Hlib Ivakin Memorial Series, no. 6 (Paris: ACHCBYZ. 2022), 28–9.

¹⁷⁰ Ben Raffield, "Bands of brothers: a re-appraisal of the Viking Great Army and its implications for the Scandinavian colonization of England", *Early Medieval Europe* 24, no. 3 (2016): 308–37; Hadley and Richards, *The Viking Great Army*, 96–113.

¹⁷¹ *Annales Bertiniani*, ed. Georg Waitz, MGH SS. rer. Germ. Vol. 5 (Hannover: Hahn, 1883), 124.

occurrences prompt us to view viking encampments not solely as defensive structures but also commercial hubs.¹⁷² Kidnapping (especially high ranking) people and ransoming them back to wealthy relatives was a common strategy of viking groups.¹⁷³

The Rus' acted in tandem with this 'viking behaviour' as envisaged through the events of the siege of Bardha'ah in 943/944. The Buwayhid historian Miskawayh learned from eyewitness spectators about the conduct of the Rus' during their occupation of this town lying in the Islamic province of Arran, now in Azerbaijan. During their long stay in Bardha'ah, the Rus' held captive some of the inhabitants. With the mediation of a Christian convert called Ibn Sam'un, they stroke a deal with the Muslims of the city; they promised to let the captives leave imprisonment for a fee of twenty dirhem coins per individuals.¹⁷⁴ Negotiations, however were called off on account of local Muslim dissatisfaction with the deal, resulting in the Rus' putting many of the captives to the sword. Apart from a few runaways, only those survived who could redeem their freedom with a much larger amount of money:

“It happened in some cases that a Moslem arranged with a Russian to buy his life for a certain sum, and went with the Russian to his house or shop. When he produced his hoard, and it turned out to be more than the sum which he had covenanted to pay, the Russian would not let him keep it, not even if it were many times more than the amount, but kept raising his demands till he had ruined the man; only when the Russian was convinced that nothing remained to him, no gold, silver, bedding or clothing, would he let him go, giving him a piece of stamped clay to serve as a safe-conduct.”¹⁷⁵

This is a remarkable piece of evidence for illustrating how intricate the relationship between trade and violence was. It is intriguing for instance how the Rus' still felt obliged to constantly raise the price, and more importantly, to finally issue guarantee warrants (like modern receipts) after an unjust transaction. Why they felt this necessary is puzzling, since they were clearly in the position of overwhelming the locals in any way desired as shown by the previous massacre of the locals when demands were not met. Rapidly changing between the two modes of actions (multiple times) leaves the modern reader stunned over the paradox of showing no remorse, yet being still concerned about

¹⁷² Christian Coojimans, *Monarchs and Hydrarchs. The conceptual development of viking activity across the Frankish realm (c. 750–940)*, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, no. 2 (London: Routledge, 2020), 145; Raffield: “Bound in captivity”, 420–1.

¹⁷³ Raffield, “Bound in captivity”, 419–21.

¹⁷⁴ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 63.

¹⁷⁵ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 5, 70; original: Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 64.

the formalities and legality of the transaction. The moral difference did not exist in the viking (neither in Rus') mind: violence was simply a coercive mean to strike better deals.

This was also clearly the case with major Rus' assaults on Byzantine lands. After each Rus' attack, none of which succeeded in capturing the Byzantine capital, a peace treaty was struck between the Rus' and the Greeks. As apparent from the *clausulae* of these treaties of 907, 912 and 945, the only concern of the Rus' was to extort favourable commercial deals from the Byzantines. These included free provisioning, housing and repairment of ships, as well as tax exemptions or leisure activities while on business (e.g. unlimited access to the bathhouses of Constantinople).¹⁷⁶

A lust for trading advantages governed political decisions accompanied by warfare. With setting up fortified settlements (called *gorodishche*) along the rivers, the only passable highways in the forest belt, the Scandinavians aimed for controlling the trade routes. Their gradual southern movement towards Kiev around the turn of ninth-tenth centuries is mirroring a desire to be closer to the Byzantine fairs. The town of Bardha'ah occupied by the Rus' in 943 and held for months with the clear intention of settling there was likely motivated by the connectedness and richness of the town. A scholar described Bardha'ah as a 'Caucasian Baghdad'.¹⁷⁷ A similar move is reported in the PVL about the market of Pereyaslavets on the Danube to where Prince Sviatoslav intended to transfer his seat saying: "that is the center of my realm, where all riches are concentrated: gold, silks, wine and various fruits from Greece, silver and horses from Hungary and Bohemia, and from Rus' furs, wax, honey and slaves."¹⁷⁸ Sviatoslav took arms to conquer Bulgaria and make this commercial hub his new capital, and it has been also argued that his campaign against Khazaria in 965 was also prompted by taking over the lucrative Volga route.¹⁷⁹ It should not be forgotten that internal rivalries between Scandinavian Rus' groupings sometimes were severe and many of these clashes might have had most to do with commercial hegemonies and advantages.

Trade also had a different character in the East characterized by threats of violent clashes along the trade routes. The main reason for this was that the territories inhabited by Rus' groups lay along the rivers in the forest belt of today's Belarus, European Russia and Ukraine, whilst their destinations were in the Islamic world or Byzantium where the road led through the western branches of the Eurasian steppe belt. The steppe was controlled by nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes of Turkic or Iranian descent, some of which formed confederations or complex steppe states. In the Volga area, the Khazars and from the third decade of the tenth century, the Volga Bulgars expropriated the right to deal with Muslim traders and assumed a mediatory role between Scandinavia, the Rus' and the

¹⁷⁶ PVL 17, 24.

¹⁷⁷ Aleksandr Yu. Yakubovskiy, "Ibn-Miskaveykh o pokhode Rusov na Berdaa v 332 g. = 943/4 g.", *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* 24 (1926): 71–80.

¹⁷⁸ RPC 86; PVL 32.

¹⁷⁹ Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 144–6.

Islamic world. In the Dnieper area, from the mid-ninth century the Magyars, from the early tenth the Pechenegs hindered passage.

In light of this, it is not surprising to see Rus' traders in the sources as on the one hand being afraid of travelling through these dangerous lands, on the other hand as carrying arms or actually being involved in fighting during commercial missions. The offences committed by the nomadic Pechenegs against Rus' traders sailing on the Dnieper are well-known from the DAI:

“Nor can the Russians come at this imperial city of the Romans, either for war or for trade, unless they are at peace with the Pechenegs, because when the Russians come with their ships to the barrages of the river and cannot pass through unless they lift their ships off the river and carry them past by portaging them on their shoulders, then the men of this nation of the Pechenegs set upon them, and, as they cannot do two things at once, they are easily routed and cut to pieces.”¹⁸⁰

Nomads (and others in the region), together with their cargoes, regarded any vessels that drifted ashore on their territories their own property.¹⁸¹ The behaviour of the Pechenegs when escorting the Rus' ship caravan all the way along the Black Sea shore echoes this mentality well. That is probably why the Rus' had to disembark here too, and in case assist the crews of drifted vessels.¹⁸² Terrestrial routes did not cease to be perilous either; Adam of Bremen highlighted in 1070 that the Swedes preferred to sail on waters to Greece rather than use the land routes hindered by “barbarian nations” (*barbarae gentes*).¹⁸³

Internal competitors and trading partners also could cause perils. A Scandinavian trading and tribute-collecting outpost in Supruty near the Oka was wiped out by ambushers using lancet-headed arrows, indicating that they were also Scandinavians.¹⁸⁴ As seen in the case of Hróðfúss betrayal was not unprecedented. Ibn Rusta's words on the Rus' not even daring to go out to relieve themselves without a drawn sword for fear of being killed and robbed by their compatriots, is revealing even if somewhat exaggerated.¹⁸⁵ According to a Gotlandic runestone (G 134), a Scandinavian named Hróðfúss, was killed on an expedition by his trading partners called *blakumen*, who can be identified with the inhabitants of the Dniester area (Vlachs? Cumans?) in the first half of the eleventh century

¹⁸⁰ DAI 50–1.

¹⁸¹ Katona, *Vikings of the steppe*, 49–50.

¹⁸² DAI 62–3

¹⁸³ Magister Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, no. 2 (Hannover: Hahn, 1917), 242.

¹⁸⁴ Murasheva, “Rus, routes and sites”, 223–8.

¹⁸⁵ BGA I–7, 147.

when the runestone was erected.¹⁸⁶ Even the Rus' merchants encountered by Ibn Faḍlān along the more peaceful Volga route in Bulgar were said to be armed to the teeth with "axes, swords and daggers" and kept them always at the ready.¹⁸⁷ The Byzantines were on their guard towards these 'merchants' too, and according to the treaties sealed in 907 and 945, only let the Rus' into Constantinople unarmed through a single gate and quartered them in the St. Mamas district under close supervision.¹⁸⁸ However, the treaties of 911 and 945 make clear that such measurements did not always work; new provisions, enforcing fines, had to be laid down against those Rus' who committed murder with weapons in the Byzantine city.¹⁸⁹ Even the nomads probably felt the need to remain reserved: Rus' crews arriving in the Volga market of Bulgar had to construct their own cottages and dwell outside the town, much in contrast of letting peaceful Islamic diplomats and merchants into Volga Bulghar and Oghuz' yurts for the duration of their stay.¹⁹⁰

Mercantile missions naturally could go wrong in the West too, as seen by the confusions caused on the Dorset shores sometime between 786–802. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that the local reeve welcoming thought-to-be traders from Scandinavia was stricken dead by them,¹⁹¹ but looting did not follow the incident suggesting it to be a derailed commercial transaction. However, the conformity in the sources about the violent connotations of trading enterprises in the East is in my opinion a reflection of reality: traveling on account of trade could cost one's life due to regular threats along the route. To take big risks was for sure only worth if the reward equalled it in magnitude.

Thus, Scandinavians operating in the East were just as much warriors as traders. The simultaneous nature of warfare and trade makes it all the more justified to use the expression 'warrior-merchants' for the Rus'. What has been said so far is hardly revelatory knowledge. Nevertheless, a few aspects stand out which is worth articulating. Judging by the goals, social structures and the execution of trade and raids, western and eastern viking activity show basic similarities, making it unequivocal that they were linked and should be examined together. Characterizing eastern viking history as less reminiscent of viking activity in the West is misguided by the nature of the source material. That Russia was more 'peaceful' on account of large-scale early migration and settlement of Scandinavian families there, as well as due to a long-distance trade system flowing undisturbed, fails to consider the political circumstances in the region; the regular exploitation of weaker opponents (mainly the Slavs), the hardships of confrontation with the neighbouring steppe nomads, and the keeping of the 'rules' of more powerful partners. These statements served to prepare ground for the examination of

¹⁸⁶ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 257–8.

¹⁸⁷ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1.

¹⁸⁸ PVL 17, 24.

¹⁸⁹ PVL 18, 25.

¹⁹⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 204–5, 216–7, 242–3.

¹⁹¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Michael J. Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1996), 54.

another field where warfare and trade was linked in the East, and which harmonize well with the western evidence, yet brings out unique features of the eastern Viking Age. We now turn to swords.

Sources and literature about Rus' swords

There are only a handful of sources which report about Rus' swords. Most of these belong to the genre of Islamic geographical literature like the continuators of the Jayhānī' and Balkhī traditions, as well as Ibn Faḍlān. The genre and the relevant authors were introduced in detail in the chapter on the sources. The few others are Arabo-Persian historical (or in a few cases scientific) works, produced in distinguished courts of the Islamic world, in one case in Buwayhid Rayy and Baghdad (Miskawayh), in another in Farighunid Guzgan (*Hudūd al-Ālam*), and the rest in the Ghaznavid courts of Ghazna in modern-day Afghanistan and Lahore (or Delhi) in India (Fakhr-i Mudabbir). These statements are extremely short, rarely longer than a sentence and sometimes only a few words, which makes it impossible to ask and answer complex questions concerning Rus' sword production, use or trade. However, even such brief references have the potential to reveal larger issues of chronology by a careful dating of the relevant passages and the examination of the methodology of the authors. The main reports are going to be presented in a chronological manner to illustrate developments in Rus' sword production and trade. When supplemented with other contemporary Muslim works (like the precious treatise on swords by the famous scholar al-Kindī), and the archaeological material as well as the western sources relating to contemporary Scandinavians and swords, this taciturn data is illuminated much better.

I have not found any scholarly attempt so far to systematically deal with Rus' swords on the basis of written sources and to chronologically assess the information. Therefore, Rus' swords feature only in general works on Rus' and viking history as only a small segment of a larger story: they are usually merely listed among the articles of Rus' traders without further discussion.¹⁹² For instance, in their seminal work on early Rus' history, Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard briefly note that "Arabic writers mention 'Frankish swords' as forming one of the Rus exports to the Muslim world."¹⁹³ Later, the only chronological marker they make is that Frankish swords were brought down to the Black

¹⁹² E.g. Peter Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings. AD 700–1100* (London: Methuen, 1982), 114; Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 2nd ed., trans. Susan M. Margeson and Kirsten Williams (London: Penguin, 1998), 520; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 254; James Howard-Johnston, "The fur trade in the early Middle Ages", in *Viking-Age Trade. Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, ed. Jacek Gruszczyński, Marek Jankowiak and Jonathan Shepard, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, no. 3 (London: Routledge, 2021), 60; Dariusz Adamczyk, "Trading networks, warlords and hoarders. Islamic coin flows into Poland in the Viking Age", in *Viking-Age Trade. Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, ed. Jacek Gruszczyński, Marek Jankowiak and Jonathan Shepard, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, no. 3 (London: Routledge, 2021), 134; Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy. Communications and Commerce AD 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 610, 732.

¹⁹³ Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 42, 48.

Sea “by the later ninth century”.¹⁹⁴ In a more recent article, Shepard notes that the Rus’ commerce in “Frankish swords” probably continued into the tenth century.¹⁹⁵ The reticence is no doubt to be sought in the shortness of the sources. We only possess bits of taciturn references in contemporary Muslim sources, which are not just difficult to interpret, but do not present coherent narratives either.

Even more specialist writings on swords focus on these Arabic statements only in terms of motifs. Zeki Validi Togan addressing more broadly Germanic swords in the Arabic sources, does not concern himself with chronology either; he mainly outlines the admiration shown by Islamic authors for high quality Germanic (Scandinavian, Frankish and Rus’) blades as well as illustrating the wide knowledge in the Islamic world about such weapons from Baghdad through Khwarazm to Afghanistan. He achieves this by jointing sources ranging in chronology from the ninth century to the eleventh.¹⁹⁶ Togan’s article is more of a collection of the Arabic sources mentioning swords and – although excellent as it is – rarely presents far-reaching conclusions or context specific results about the Rus’. In Hilda Ellis Davidson’s standard work on Anglo-Saxon and viking swords, trade does not feature at all. She is building forth on Togan’s article, and utilizes the Muslim sources to illustrate the knowledge of pattern-welding technique among the Rus’, and to express some skepticism about the assumption (based on al-Bīrūnī) that they learned damascening by the eleventh century.¹⁹⁷ Anne Stalsberg’s article, mainly concerned with the archaeological evidence, only uses the Arabic sources to illustrate her point about the existence of weapon trade outside the Carolingian Empire.¹⁹⁸ On archaeological grounds, Ingmar Jansson presents the view that swords arrived in Russia not only from Scandinavia but also from Central Europe and their presence should rather be explained as warrior equipment as trade items because their number is relatively low.¹⁹⁹ Another archaeologist, Anatoly Kirpichnikov contrasted brief statements by Arabic authors to the archaeological material and in cases revealed their correlations. Kirpichnikov was also the only one who defined the chronological boundaries of the Rus’ sword trade, although he relied on archaeological material. He made note about larger-scale changes in the supply of swords in the region; swords arrived initially from Frankish workshops during the ninth-tenth centuries, but were also produced in Rus’ lands later to be finally replaced by eastern blades from the twelfth century.²⁰⁰ In his article on “weapon trade in

¹⁹⁴ Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 77.

¹⁹⁵ Jonathan Shepard, “Why Gotland?”, in *Viking-Age Trade. Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, ed. Jacek Gruszczyński, Marek Jankowiak and Jonathan Shepard, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, no. 3 (London: Routledge, 2021), 6.

¹⁹⁶ Zeki Validi Togan, “Die Schwerter der Germanen, nach arabischen Berichten des 9—11. Jahrhunderts”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 9, no. 1 (1936): 19–37.

¹⁹⁷ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The sword in Anglo-Saxon England. Its archaeology and literature* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), 114–7.

¹⁹⁸ Anne Stalsberg, “Swords from the Carolingian Empire to the Baltic Sea and Beyond”, in *Identity formation and diversity in the early medieval Baltic and beyond. Communicators and Communication*, ed. Johan Callmer, Ingrid Gustin and Mats Roslund, The Northern World, no. 75 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 271–3.

¹⁹⁹ Jansson, “Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe”, 791.

²⁰⁰ Anatoly Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie. Vol. 1. Mechi i sabli* (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), 46–9.

Eastern Europe”, Szabolcs Polgár collected written sources mentioning the arms trade in the region between the ninth and twelfth centuries, and followed Kirpichnikov regarding a broad chronology.²⁰¹ This general framework shall be further refined.

In addition, all the above-mentioned statements – with the slight exception of Kirpichnikov – seem to assume that Rus’ sword trade was constant (and static) throughout the Viking Age. The brief nature of the information understandably prompted researchers to combine the data rather than to contrast them more traditionally alongside chronology. The fear that such meagre information is inadequate for a deeper analysis is to a certain extent justified. However, even if being tentative to some extent, a traditional historiographical method reviewing events in sequence of time, might bring interesting details to light.

Chronology of the sword trade

The first author to report about the Rus’ in extent is Ibn Khurradādhbih in his *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (*Book of Roads and Kingdoms*). The passage, in which he describes the itinerary of Rus’ traders, mention swords (*suyūf*) among their merchandise brought from the “territory of the Saqaliba” through Byzantium or Khazaria to Baghdad or even further away to Central Asia.²⁰² Our most important question now concerns the time this information pertains to. In order to evaluate the passage, we have to consider the historiographic background of Ibn Khurradādhbih’s work in general; its manuscripts, dating and methodology. Only then can we treat the passage in its right historical context.

The chronology in this regard is not without interest. The work came down to us in two different redactions; Version 1 (labelled often as ‘B’), usually dated to 846/7, and Version 2 (labelled often as ‘A’), assumed to be stemming from around 885/6.²⁰³ There are notable differences between the two redactions. Version 1 is remarkably shorter and only contains two poems introduced by a simple phrase (‘said the poet’). In contrast, around 60 poems are embedded in Version 2, each thoroughly referenced by the names of corresponding poets. The relationship between the two redactions is far from clear. The traditional view, advocated by the first editor of the text, De Goeje, holds that Version 1 was a preliminary, unfinished edition which is definitely the older one as no information in the text

²⁰¹ Szabolcs Polgár, “Kora középkori (9–12. századi) kelet-európai fegyverkereskedelemre utaló feljegyzések az írott forrásokban”, in *Fegyveres nomádok, nomád fegyverek*, ed. László Balogh and László Keller, Magyar Őstörténeti Könyvtár, no. 21 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2004), 92–101 (esp. 94–5 and 98).

²⁰² BGA I–6, 154.

²⁰³ The labelling of the manuscripts on the traditional way was invented by Goeje and subsequently used by others. The terms Version 1 and 2 were introduced by Montgomery and will be followed here. See: James E. Montgomery, “Serendipity, Resistance, and Multivalency: Ibn Khurradādhbih and his *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*”, in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy, Studies in Arabic Language and Literature, no. 6 (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2005), 177–232.

succeeds the date 848/9.²⁰⁴ Accordingly, Version 2 is in a more complete form, boosted up with elaborate references to Arabic poetry, one of which (from al-Buḥturī) mention an event which dates the entire work after 882/3.²⁰⁵

There is, however another view, which sees the difference between the two redactions reversely. The Russian orientalist, Bulgakov argued that Version 1 actually represents an abridged form of Version 2, cleansing the text from uninformative poetic references and irrelevant stories. This means that in fact there was only a single true redaction (Version 2) which dates from the 880s.²⁰⁶ Bulgakov supported his view by the note in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm to a certain al-Marwazī as the first who authored a *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-'l-mamālik* in 887/8. Ibn al-Nadīm was familiar with Ibn Khurradādhbih's labour, yet he does not signal him as the first who authored a work in this genre. This suggests that an 'early' version of the *Kitāb* of Ibn Khurradādhbih did not exist, since Ibn al-Nadīm should have known about it.²⁰⁷ This is further supported by another contemporary geographer, Ibn al-Faqīh, who only borrowed passages from Ibn Khurradādhbih's Version 2, not Version 1 as De Goeje believed.²⁰⁸

The matter is not easy to decide and naturally influences the dating of the passage on the Rus'. Montgomery made a strong case for the existence of two redactions through examining the ideological motifs behind the dedication of Version 2 to an unnamed ruler, in his view the then new caliph al-Mu'taḍid.²⁰⁹ His convincing argument for seeing the relationship between Version 1 and Version 2 as that of an 'update' (rather than an 'abridgement'), however, still leaves the exact dating of the earlier redaction open. Nobody countered one of Bulgakov's important argument that the shorter and earlier version refers to Ja'far b. 'Abd-al Raḥmān already as one of the Hiwālids²¹⁰ (another name for the Yu'firids), even though he was the founder of the dynasty. Ja'far expanded his realm from Shibām (today in western Yemen) around 861 when he defeated the governor of Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847–861).²¹¹ Thus, it is far to suppose that Ibn Khurradādhbih wrote from a distant perspective about this past event, and already the presence of such data in the allegedly early version of the *Kitāb* refutes De Goeje's dating of the first redaction to c. 846/7. Therefore, despite the fact that both redactions contain the passage on the Rus', it is impossible to confirm that the information predates the mid-ninth century. A later date of composition is equally hard to validate as

²⁰⁴ BGA I–6, xx.

²⁰⁵ BGA I–6, ix; also shared by: Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde*, 90–1.

²⁰⁶ P. G. Bulgakov, "Kniga putey i gosudarstv' Ibn Khordadbeha", *Palestinskiy Sbornik* 3, no. 66 (1958): 127–36.

²⁰⁷ Bulgakov, "Kniga putey i gosudarstv'", 136.

²⁰⁸ Bulgakov, "Kniga putey i gosudarstv'", 131–2.

²⁰⁹ Montgomery, "Serendipity, Resistance, and Multivalency", 198–200, 209–10, 222.

²¹⁰ BGA I–6, 142; Bulgakov, "Kniga putey i gosudarstv'", 136.

²¹¹ Rex G. Smith, "Yu'firids", in *EL²*, Vol. 11, ed. J. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), 342.

Ibn Khurradādhbih is notorious for presenting anachronistic information,²¹² thus allowing the Rus' package to date from earlier, regardless of the time of the actual composition of the work itself. We have to conclude that further evidence is needed even for a tentative dating of such a flowing sword trade, to which we will get back later in the chapter.

In any case, many scholars imply (and nobody assumed the contrary so far) that Rus' trade in swords was continuous throughout the Viking Age. I do not believe this to be the case. The same passage as that of Ibn Khurradādhbih's is also preserved in Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī's *Kitāb al-Buldān* (*Book of Countries*) written in ca. 902. However, there are notable differences: Ibn al-Faqīh replaces the Rus' with the Saqāliba, omits to mention the swords and takes Rayy instead of Baghdad the final destination of the merchant group.²¹³ Pritsak argued that the latter is explained by the fact Ibn al-Faqīh and his father from whom he might have acquired important information, originated from Hamadhān. Their province Jibāl (where Rayy was located too) was a rival of Iraq, therefore, they wanted to emphasize the prosperity of their home and diminish Baghdad's role as a centre of long-distance commerce. As he elaborated, the rest of the differences between the two authors reflect only various reworkings of a common source they copied.²¹⁴ I suppose the majority of scholars would not share this opinion, but even if accepted, we still do not know, why the Rus', together with the swords disappeared from the passage. Although Ibn al-Faqīh was an epigone and not a scholar of originality, the omission of these crucial information might be intentional. He was not the only one, who knew Ibn Khurradādhbih's *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-'l-mamālik* and 'forgot' to mention the long-distance sword trade of the Rus': later authors reporting about them, such as continuators of the Jayhānī and Balkhī traditions do not incorporate such information either.

The chronologically next author who reports about Rus' swords is the Persian Ibn Rusta, in his *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥḥa* (*Book of precious records*) composed between 903–913. The work is a 'short encyclopedia' written for secretaries, and provides astonishing data on territories outside the Dār al-'Islām.²¹⁵ To this type of descriptions belongs his chapter on the Rus', in which the author paints a roughed-up picture on Rus' lifestyle. The passage, however, is not Ibn Rusta's own. It was borrowed from an earlier geographer, Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Jayhānī, the Samanid vizier of Bukhara in the early tenth century. Since Jayhānī's work did not survive, the text can only be reconstructed from fragments preserved in the works of later authors. The compositional date of

²¹² Bulgakov, "Kniga putej i gosudarstv", 135–6.

²¹³ BGA I–5, 270–1.

²¹⁴ Omeljan Pritsak, "An Arabic Text on the Trade Route of the Corporation of ar-Rūs in the Second Half of the Ninth Century" *Folia Orientalia* 12 (1970): 243–8.

²¹⁵ Krachkovskiy, *Izbrannye sochineniya*, 159; Ahmad S. Maqbul, "Ibn Rusta", in *El²*, Vol. 3, ed. B. Lewis, V. L. Ménage, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 920–1; the audience of Ibn Rusta being the official administrative layer of Islamic courts was doubted by Miquel, who argued that it was meant for a more general educated elite interested in the affairs of the Dār al-'Islām and beyond. Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde*, 192–7.

Jayhānī's work is variously dated between 892 and 922,²¹⁶ but his 'Eastern European dossier' attributed to an anonymous author – and called 'Anonymous Relation' – must date back to roughly the 870–880s based on inner information within the text. This dossier does refer to the Magyar migration in 895, but do speak of Svatopluk I, Duke of Great Moravia, who ruled independently from 874. The Byzantine ruler Basil I (867–86) is also mentioned in the text as a convertor of Slav groups. The fact that the Rus' are portrayed as living in a mysterious island (probably around Rurikogo Gorodische) and not in Kiev, was also taken as an indication that the text cannot have been written after 882, the traditional date of the PVL for the occupation of the town. Although the chronology of the PVL is no longer trusted to that extent, the ruler of the Rus' as *hāqān* in the 'Anonymous Relation', conforms to the vocabulary of western sources between 839 and 871 about the ruler of the Rus'. The presence of the Magyars on the Pontic steppes, and the silence on the Pechenegs' arrival to the East of the Don assures that the basic assumption is probably right: the text covers the last decades of the ninth century.²¹⁷

It is quite striking that swords are more than once mentioned in this quite short account (amounting to maximum one or two pages in modern editions), and apparently constituted the essence of Rus' warrior life to the minds of the 'Anonymous Relation' (attributed to Jayhānī) and Ibn Rusta. According to the text, newborn Rus' babies are presented with swords by their fathers in order to earn a living for themselves in the future. There is also talk about the Rus' custom of swordfighting for settling disputes between members of Rus' society, and that swords are always kept at hand by Rus' warriors for protection against treacherous comrades. The informant of the text even seemed to know what type of swords the Rus' were wielding, which he identifies as *as-sulaymānīya*.²¹⁸ No other weapons of the Rus' are mentioned. The keen interest with which the 'Anonymous Relation' turns towards Rus' swords makes it quite astonishing that trade in relation to them is not spoken of. Ibn Rusta had the chance to update this passage in the beginning of the tenth century, yet he apparently decided not to talk about Rus' sword trade, even though this would have had to be expected from the report on two accounts. Firstly, he consulted a more elaborate version of Ibn Khuradādhbih's *Kitāb al-Masālik wa- 'l-mamālik* (which we do not possess),²¹⁹ thus had to be familiar with the over-arching transcontinental sword trade recorded by the earlier author. Secondly, Ibn Rusta did show an interest in commerce and in fact details Rus' trade; the Rus' raid the Slavs and sell their captives in Khazaria and Bulgar, alongside "sable, grey squirrel and other (furs)" (*al-samūr wa- 'l-sinjāb wa-gharīr*) which

²¹⁶ Cf. Krachkovskiy, *Izbrannye sochineniya*, 222.

²¹⁷ Bálint Hóman, "Östörténetünk keleti forrásai", *Századok* 10 (1908): 865–83; Ducène, "Other Arab geographers' sources on the north", 78.

²¹⁸ BGA I–7, 145–6.

²¹⁹ Maqbul, "Ibn Rusta", 621.

are sold for silver coins.²²⁰ Ibn Rusta would be now the third knowledgeable author in sequence – after Ibn al-Faqīh and the author of the ‘Anonymous Relation’ (as well as Jayhānī) – who for surely read about the Rus’ sword trade, however did not write about it in their works. To me, this suggests that the sword trade noted by Ibn Khurradādhbih – regardless of the date of its appearance – certainly did not function or was negligible, by the early tenth century, or possibly even earlier in the last decades of the ninth.

This is reinforced by another omission featuring in the *Kitāb* of Ibn Faḍlān. The Baghdadi envoy was much concerned with Rus’ trade in Volga Bulgharia when he met them there in 922. Apart from a vague sentence about various unnamed merchandise they brought to trade, he specifies that the Rus’ sell slave women and sable pelts in the Volga market of Bulgar.²²¹ It cannot be claimed that Ibn Faḍlān was simply uninterested in swords, as he closely inspected the weaponry of Rus’ warriors. Among the enumerated weapons, it is actually only swords about which he makes further commentaries by recognizing their broad and ridged blades as of Frankish type.²²² Later on he sees the swords in action, when two sacrificial horses are hacked to pieces.²²³ He probably have seen the Rus’ swords again when the funeral of a Rus’ chieftain is prepared and “all his weaponry” (*bi-jamī’ silāḥihī*) are laid by his side.²²⁴ The account betrays similar patterns to that of Ibn Rusta: a vivid interest in Rus’ trade operations as well as swords, without a sign indicating that the latter served as merchandise. If the Rus’ did (still) trade in swords in 922, it must have been on a really small-scale, much outshined by the profits of the fur and slave trade as evidently recognized by outside observers.

The conspicuous silence after Ibn Khurradādhbih is not broken until much later. The next source reporting explicitly about Rus’ sword trade is the anonymous Persian world geography, the *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* composed in 982/983. The work was dedicated to Abu’l Haret Muhammad, ruler of the Farighunid dynasty in Guzgan, present-day Northern Afghanistan.²²⁵ Paragraph 44 of this lengthy encyclopaedia is entitled *Discourse on the Rūs Country and its towns*, which introduces this ‘vast land’ of the North and its warlike inhabitants. The text pays attention to their social structures: labels their king as a *khāqān*, mentions their shaman-like ‘physicians’, the servile status of a group of Slavs within Rus’ society, and notes their financial means, i. e. tithes paid to their ruler from the profits of commerce. A short ethnographic description is also given on their appearance and funerary

²²⁰ BGA I–7, 145–6.

²²¹ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 242–3.

²²² Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1.

²²³ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 248–9.

²²⁴ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 248–9.

²²⁵ Clifford E. Bosworth, “Hudūd al-‘Ālam”, in *El²*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2012), Consulted online on 31 August 2022 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8627>

customs.²²⁶ Then, the author moves on to their three towns, Kūyāba, Šlāba and Urtāb, two of which are connected to sword production and (presumably) trade. According to the text, Kūyāba “is the town [land?] of the Rūs lying nearest to the Islamic lands. It is a pleasant place and is the seat of the king. It produces various furs (*mūy*) and valuable swords”. Urtāb is “a town where strangers are killed whenever they visit it. It produces very valuable blades and swords which can be bent in two (*ū rā du tāh tavān kardan*), but as soon as the hand is removed they return to their former state.”²²⁷ Minorsky translated the verb *khīz* as ‘to produce’, which is fair enough. However, the preposition *āz*, meaning ‘from’, is attached to the subjects of the sentences (which in both the cases are the towns, namely Kūyāba and Urtāb), implying that the enumerated products are rather ‘taken (out) from’ the towns. The attributive ‘valuable’ (*bāqīmat*) attached to these swords (*shamshīr*) and blades (*tīgh*) also suggests that these products were indeed purchased by someone, thus entered commercial circulation. Anyhow, throughout the text several towns ‘produce’ manifold products, by which the author hardly means that they are only utilized or consumed locally. Based on this, the Rus’ apparently owned a booming enterprise; they produced and sold (valuable) swords on a large-scale.

Much ink has been spent on the three ‘*aṣnāf*’ ‘types/tribes/kinds’ of the Rus’ as well as on the identification and localization of their towns, especially the mysterious Urtāb appearing in other sources mostly in the form of ‘Arthā (with various spellings). It is generally accepted that Kūyāba cannot be anything else than Kiev and Šlāba is probably the town of the Slovenes, i.e. Novgorod. In the case of ‘Arthā opinions range from Ryazan, Perm, Tmutorakan, Chernigov, Sarskoe Gorodische and the West Slavic island of Rügen to a settlement of the Mordovian Ezra.²²⁸ The various solutions only reveal the uncertainty of the information. For the present purposes, the identification of the towns is less important than the chronological framework in which the passage is to be understood.

To understand what period this description exactly refers to, we have to understand the methodology of the *Ḥudūd*’s writer. Since we know nothing about the author himself and the work was preserved in a single manuscript, we have to deduce everything on philological grounds from the

²²⁶ Clifford Edmund Bosworth (ed.), *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam. ‘The Region of the World’. A Persian geography 372 A. H.–982 A.D.*, trans. Vladimir Minorsky. 2nd ed. E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series New Series, no. 11 (Cambridge: E. J. W. Gibb, 1982), 159; original: Manoochehr Sotoodeh (ed.), *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam. Min al-Mashriq ila al-Maghrib. Compiled in 982–3 A.D. = 372 A.H.* (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1962), 188–9.

²²⁷ Bosworth, *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, 159; Sotoodeh, *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, 189.

²²⁸ Ivan Hrbek, “Der dritte Stamm der Rus nach arabischen Quellen”, *Archiv Orientalní* 25 (1957): 628–52; Omeljan Pritsak, “The Name of the Third Kind of Rus and of Their City”, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 1–2 (1967): 2–9; Frantisek Kmietowicz, “Artāniya-Artā, *Folia Orientalia* 14 (1972–1973): 231–60; Alf Thulin, “The ‘Third Tribe’ of the Rus”, *Slavia Antiqua* 25 (1978): 99–139; Anatoliy Petrovich Novosel’tsev, “Khudud al-‘Ālam kak istochnik o stranakh i narodakh Vostochnoy Yevropy”, *Istoriya SSSR*, no. 5. (1986): 90–103; Irina G. Kononova, “Rasskaz o trekh gruppakh rusov v sochineniyakh arabskikh avtorov XII–XIV vv.”, *Drevneyshiy gosudarstva Vostochnoy Yevropy: Materialy i issledovaniya. 1992–1993 gg.* (1995): 139–48; Yuriy Dyba, “Geografiya pochatkovoyi rusi za skhidnymi dzherelamy”, *Knyazh a doba: istoriya i kul’tura* 10 (2016): 9–58; Klima László, “Muszlim geográfusok és utazók Artā városáról és az Artāniya népről”, in *Hadak útján: A népvándorlások fiatal kutatóinak XXIX. konferenciája*, ed. Attila Türk (Budapest: Martin Opitz Kiadó, 2022), 463–79.

text itself. In this regard, we are in the immense debt of Vladimir Minorsky for his detailed commentary attached to his English translation. As he notes, the author of the *Hudūd* was a “cabinet scholar”.²²⁹ The work is divided alongside geographical regions (Asia, Europe, Libya) and discusses 45 lands (*nāḥiyat*), but only reflects personal experience on Gūzgānān (§23,47.), and maybe Gīlān (§32, 24.-5.). Other than that, he only relied on previous works to which he unfortunately does not make reference in the text. He vaguely refers to “books”, “memories of the sages”, and “information (heard)” elsewhere or simply uses the term “mentioned” (somewhere) when alluding to his sources.²³⁰ The correlation of the text to other accounts, however, reveals his sources.

In the case of his Turkic dossier (to which the discourse on the Rus’ country belongs), a few sources can indeed be identified. He had access to Ibn Khurradādhbih’s or Jayhānī’s *Kitāb al-masālik wa- l-mamālik* (as there was a confusion between the two in the period).²³¹ As Montgomery convincingly demonstrated, the first part of his description on the Rus’ country does not owe its source to Ibn Rusta as was previously believed by Minorsky. A systematic comparison brings out essential differences between the two. The *Hudūd* omits striking details, such as the presentation of a sword to a new born baby, the *sulaymānīya* swords, and clothes, wives, and other things following Rus’ dead to the grave.²³² These would be impossible to leave out if they would have shared the same source. Montgomery surmises that the difference is to be sought in the fact that Ibn Rusta acquired his intel personally from Jayhānī as his text’s structure is rumbling.²³³ I think this is unlikely, given the fact that other continuators of the Jayhānī tradition ‘rumble’ the passage in the same way (e.g. Gardīzī), thus clearly had the same written prototype in front of them as Ibn Rusta. Nevertheless, I agree with the assertion that the *Hudūd* might have worked from a different version of Jayhānī. The source, most systematically utilized in the *Hudūd*, however, is al-Iṣṭakhrī. There is not the slightest doubt that the description on the Rus’ towns was borrowed from him:

“Wa-l-rūs hum thalātha ‘aṣnāf fa-ṣanaf hum ‘aqrab ‘ilā bulghār wa-malikuhum yuqīmu bi-madīnatin tusammā kūyāba wa-hiya ‘akbaru min bulghār wa-ṣanaf ‘ab’adu minhum yusammūna al-ṣalāwīya wa-ṣanaf yusammūna al-’arthānīya wa-malikuhum muqīmūn bi-’arthā wa-l-nās yablughūna fī al-tijāra ‘ilā kūyāba fa-’amma ‘arthā fa-’innahu lā yudhkaru ‘anna ‘aḥadan dakhlahā min al-ghurabā’ li-’annahum yaqtulūna kulla man waṭa’a ‘arḍahum min al-ghurabā’ wa-’innamā yanḥadīrūna fī al-mā’ yattajirūna fa-lā yukhbirūna

²²⁹ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-‘Ālam*, xlviii.

²³⁰ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-‘Ālam*, xlviii.

²³¹ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-‘Ālam*, li.

²³² James E. Montgomery, “Ibn Rusta’s lack of eloquence”, *Edebiyāt* 12 (2001): 82–4.

²³³ Montgomery, “Ibn Rusta’s lack of eloquence”, 85.

bi-shayin min 'umūrihim wa-matājirahum wa-lā yatrūkūna 'aḥadan yaṣṣābuhum wa-lā yadkhulu bilādahum wa-yuḥmalu min 'arthā al-sammūr al-'aswad wa-l-raṣāṣ.”²³⁴

“And the Rus’ they are of three kinds [types]: and one kind, they are closer to Bulghār and their king is settled in a city called Kūyāba and it is bigger than Bulghār. And [there is] a kind further from them, called al-Ṣalāwīya, and a kind called al-'Arthānīya and their king is settled in 'Arthā. And the people during their trading [missions] reach Kūyāba. And about 'Arthā, there is no mention about anybody entering it from amongst the strangers, because they kill everyone who penetrates their land. And they go down by the water, trading, not giving information about their matters or trading(s), and they do not let anyone befriend them and enter their country. And from 'Arthā is taken out black stable and lead.”²³⁵

The *Hudūd*’s author garbled information from previous intelligence and merged these into a single narrative. Sometimes he shows no awareness of source criticism, which makes his account not only unoriginal but also misplaced. This is most apparent in his borrowing of the word *khāqān* to designate the Rus’ ruler. However, he is not always an uncritical epigone. The anonymous author *Hudūd* sensibly selects information from Jayhānī and al-Iṣṭakhrī, when for instance discusses the living spaces of the Rus’. He ignores Jayhānī’s account on the “island of the Rus’” in a far-away swampy island, because it would have been in clear conflict with the three towns where the Rus’ dwell according to al-Iṣṭakhrī. He also eliminates pagan details from Rus’ funerary customs and leaves only food and drinks placed with the dead. Thus, his description of Rus’ society deviates from Jayhānī and in the words of Montgomery “paints a picture of a society with more rigorous social organization” characterized by a group of Slavs who are not exploited by raids (as in Jayhānī) but serve them, a functioning tithe system (paid to a sole ruler and his *comitatus*) and a lively commercial network.²³⁶ He also updates the section with a new detail, unknown from any other sources: the production and trade of swords, about which al-Iṣṭakhrī has no knowledge!

Thus, we end up with the following chronological layers of the whole Rus’ section: 1. The first part on the Rus’ country and society dates from the time of Jayhānī, that is c. 870–880s. 2. The passage on the Rus’ towns comes from al-Iṣṭakhrī but ultimately derives from Balkhī, his predecessor. De Goeje and others established that al-Iṣṭakhrī compiled a much enlarged version of Balkhī’s text between 930 and 933. A final version came later, about 951, and this seems to be the basis of most

²³⁴ BGA I–1, 225–6

²³⁵ Translation by Diána Kiss with my modifications.

²³⁶ Montgomery, “Ibn Rusta’s lack of eloquence”, 83.

copies circulating in the eastern part of the empire.²³⁷ Thus, al-Iṣṭakhrī's final version dates around c. 951 and Balkhī's from around c. 920.²³⁸ 3. The own updates or revisions of the *Hudūd*'s author on Rus' society and most importantly on the swords, which must pre-date the composition of the work in 982/983. The question is by how much?

Although the description of the towns dates from Balkhī's time the latest (that is the 920s), the addition on swords could in theory only come after al-Iṣṭakhrī as he still knows nothing about it. That al-Iṣṭakhrī was uninterested in or simply inattentive about the sword trade, and simply missed it, is highly unlikely. He was not only an erudite person, but also a scholar belonging to a new wave of Muslim geographical literature, placing his trust in first-hand observations. It is almost certain that he visited Arabia (at least Mecca), Iraq, Khuzistan, Daylam and Transoxiana.²³⁹ Although he never been to 'Eastern Europe' and acquired his information from Balkhī, he showed an outmost interest towards the products of various towns. He is the first to note, for instance that there was sugar cane and rice production in Khuzistan, a weaving factory in al-Sūs, or world-wide export from Qurqūb, to just name a few.²⁴⁰ It has been argued that Anonymous must have possessed a Persian translation of al-Iṣṭakhrī's work, which to our knowledge was not handed down to us.²⁴¹ This would suggest that the swords were present in some versions of al-Iṣṭakhrī and would derive from him. I, however, would like to argue for the contrary. First of all, none of the surviving manuscripts of al-Iṣṭakhrī mention the swords.²⁴² Secondly, and more importantly, there is an author who revised al-Iṣṭakhrī's work, yet swords do not feature in the updated version either.

One of the best geographers of his time, Ibn Ḥawqal was a worthy successor of al-Iṣṭakhrī. What prompted him to write his work was that he found none of the existing works on the subject satisfactory.²⁴³ He claims to have improved the work of al-Iṣṭakhrī whom he had personally met and consulted. His incorporation and correction of al-Iṣṭakhrī's *Kitāb* was not a mere update, but resulted in a new work originally entitled *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ* (*Book of the Configuration of the Land*). His most extensive additions are detectable concerning places he personally visited: the Maghreb, Spain, Sicily, Egypt, Sham, Rum, Jazira, Iraq, Khuzistan, Fars, Kirman, Sind, Azerbaijan, Jibal, Daylam and

²³⁷ Gerald R. Tibbets, "The Balkhi School of Geographers", in *The History of Cartography: Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, ed. John B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 110.

²³⁸ Michael De Goeje, "Die Istakhrī-Balkhī Frage", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländische Gesellschaft* 25 (1871): 49–51; Krachkovskiy, *Izbrannye sochineniya*, 196–7.

²³⁹ Andre Miquel, "Iṣṭakhrī", in *El²*, Vol. 4, ed. E. van Donzel, B. Lewis and Ch. Pellat (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 222–3.

²⁴⁰ Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde*, 296.

²⁴¹ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-Ālam*, lii–liii.

²⁴² Cf. with the notes in BGA I–1, 224.

²⁴³ Ahmad S. Maqbul and Franz Taeschner, "Djuḡhrāfiya", in *El²*, Vol. 2, ed. B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 581–2.

Khazaria.²⁴⁴ During his travels he partly acted as a merchant, accounting for abundance of information on products, prices and economic activity in his work.²⁴⁵

Ibn Ḥawqal also revised al-Iṣṭakhrī's passage on the three Rus' towns, yet, swords are absent from his version too.²⁴⁶ This is striking because Ibn Ḥawqal updates the information of al-Iṣṭakhrī on the Rus' with several new details; he supplements the products brought out from 'Arthā with black fox furs and mercury (*zaybaq*), likens the Rus' habit of the *suttee* to the customs of the Indians and people of Ghana and Kugha, and finally, mentions the Rus' campaign against the Volga Bulgars, Burtas' and Khazars.²⁴⁷ He dates the campaign against the three semi-nomadic groups to the year 969,²⁴⁸ which is quite close to the originally accepted date of the event (965), provided by the PVL.²⁴⁹ It is possible that the recorded date stands for the time when he actually heard about the incident, surmisable by his lamentation on the brutal destruction of Khazaria, regarding which he quotes an eyewitness interrogated by him in the given year.²⁵⁰ Ibn Ḥawqal was also aware that the Rus' occupied Bardha'ah, and are identical (to him) with those who raided Al-Andalus.²⁵¹ The combined military operation against the Volga Bulgars, Burtas' and Khazars postdates al-Iṣṭakhrī's work and proves that Ibn Ḥawqal incorporated timely information on the Rus' from his own experience as well. Therefore, he was clearly aware of contemporary political events concerning the Rus' even if his chronology was somewhat confused. I am inclined, therefore, to reject the idea that such keen observers as al-Iṣṭakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal, both highly concerned with economic matters and trade as well as possessing up-to-date intelligence on the Rus', would simply miss such a booming sword industry. If Ibn Ḥawqal (and also al-Iṣṭakhrī) had been so inattentive for sword production and trade, why would they have listed items of obviously lesser value, like lead and mercury, among the products of the Rus' towns? This is also weakened by Ibn Ḥawqal's three separate mentions of swords regarding the equipment of armies in Persia and Mesopotamia.²⁵²

I have deliberately left for last to discuss when Ibn Ḥawqal composed his work. It is accepted in the literature that the *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ* survived in at least three different redactions and most scholars surmise that the author never stopped updating his work, although we do not know when he

²⁴⁴ Tibbets, "The Balkhi School of Geographers", 111–2; Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde*, 367–91.

²⁴⁵ Andre Miquel, "Ibn Ḥawqal", in *El²*, Vol. 3, ed. B. Lewis, V. L. Ménage, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 787; Jean-Charles Ducène, "Ibn Ḥawqal", in *El³*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Devin J. Stewart (2017). Consulted online on 30 January 2023 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30810. The long-held opinion that he was a Fatimid spy has been discredited recently: Chafik T. Bencheikroun, "Requiem pour Ibn Ḥawqal. Sur l'hypothèse de l'espion fatimide", *Journal Asiatique* 304, no. 2 (2016): 193–211.

²⁴⁶ BGA II–1, 397.

²⁴⁷ BGA II–1, 393–4, 397–8.

²⁴⁸ BGA I–2, 14.

²⁴⁹ PVL 31.

²⁵⁰ BGA II–1, 393.

²⁵¹ BGA II–1, 339; BGA I–2, 14–5.

²⁵² BGA II–1, 58, 211–2, 289.

died.²⁵³ Since one of the manuscripts held in Paris (BNF 2214) was dedicated to the Hamdanid ruler Sayf al-Dawla (945–67), many believed that the first version was created before that date. However, as noted by Ducène, some of the events in the work postdates the dedicatee’s death, severely weakening this hypothesis.²⁵⁴ The most recent and elaborate examination of the manuscripts of Ibn Ḥawqal was carried out by Bencheckroun. He dates the three redactions in the following way: 966–9, 972–6, after 977. The latter is represented by the youngest, eleventh-century manuscript held in the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul (3346) on which Kramers made his critical edition superseding that of De Goeje.²⁵⁵ Based on the maps attached to the manuscript(s), and the anachronistic listing of Shirvanshah Muḥammad b. Aḥmad in a feudatory register from the time around 955 within the text, Kramers and others dated the last updated version to 988.²⁵⁶ Since we do not hear anything about the life of Ibn Ḥawqal after the year 977, most commentators date the last version between 977 and 988.²⁵⁷ However, the last derivable date from the narrative is 978/9, provided by a reference from which it becomes apparent that Abū Taghlib, the third Hamdanid emir of Mosul (967–78) was not a ruler anymore.²⁵⁸ Even if the original version was updated later, the year 969 given for the Rus’ campaign (discussed above) assure that Ibn Ḥawqal gathered his information on them at that time, which in fact remained unchanged.

Thus, we arrive at a very specific date between 969 (or 977–9) and 982/3, when it is fair to surmise that a Rus’ sword industry and long-distance trade in the said item had not operated yet. Even if we do not put our trust in a precise dating, but only in a rough estimate (969–82/3), we come as close as ever for a chronological assessment of Rus’ sword production and rising trade (*Table 1*).

Central Asia and the Rus’ swords

This is, so far, what we could deduce on the basis of *argumentum ex silentio*. We are far from proving, however, that the *Ḥudūd*’s report contains trustworthy information. To test the validity of the statement, I am going to follow up on two lines of reasoning. First, I will utilize sources which strengthen the idea that Rus’ sword trade was on the rise shortly before or in the beginning of the 980s. Secondly, I am going to assess the chance that an unnamed armchair scholar in the heart of

²⁵³ Krachkovskiy, *Izbrannye sochineniya*, 199; Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde*, 299–302; cf. Tibbets, “The Balkhi School of Geographers”, 113.

²⁵⁴ Ducène, “Ibn Ḥawqal”.

²⁵⁵ Bencheckroun, “Requiem pour Ibn Ḥawqal”, 200.

²⁵⁶ Johannes Hendrik Kramers, “La question Balkhi—Istakhri et Ibn Hawqal et l’Atlas de l’Islam”, *Acta Orientalia* 10 (1932): 9–30; Bosworth, *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, 406; Gaston Wiet, “L’importance d’Ibn Hauqal dans la littérature arabe”, in Ibn Hauqal, *Configuration de la terre (Kitab surat al-ard)*, Vol.1, trans. Johannes Hendrik Kramers and Gaston Wiet (Beirut: Commission internationale pour la traduction des chefs-d’oeuvre, 1964), xiii.

²⁵⁷ See the notes above.

²⁵⁸ Bencheckroun, “Requiem pour Ibn Ḥawqal”, 207–8.

Central Asia could acquire genuine knowledge about such a far-away people as the Rus'. In other words, I am going to measure how frequently the Rus' (and their swords) reached the vision of Central Asian Persian writers, centred in (today's) Afghanistan.

One of the authors who can lend support to my hypothesis is the most skilled and dedicated geographer of his time, Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī. His *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm* (*The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*) represents the highest peak of Muslim world geography of the age. It was definitely the most developed version of the Balkhī tradition as far as the maps are concerned, but its text is much more elaborate and stands on his own. The work existed in apparently two editions, one (as the author claims) dates from 985/6, and the other, used by Yāqūt, was compiled three years later (988/9). Muqaddasī toured all around the Muslim world – with the exception of Spain, Sijistan (today's Sistan) and Sindh (now in Pakistan) – and everything he attentively observed, read or heard from trustworthy people was systematically processed in his book.²⁵⁹ Unfortunately, he did not report about 'Eastern Europe' with the exception of Volga Bulgharia whose inhabitants were Muslims and therefore aroused his attention. It is in this connection that his information, usually dated between c. 980 and 985, on sword trade surfaces. Among the import commodities of the fertile oasis region of Khwarazm, in the delta of the Amu Darya south of the Aral Sea, he lists "sable [sammūr], grey squirrel [sinjāb], ermine [*qāqūn], mink [fanak], fox, marten [dallah], beaver [*khazbūst], spotted hare [*kharkūsh], goatskins [*bazbūst], wax, arrows, birch wood [*tūz], tall fur caps [qalānīs], isinglas [gharā samak, fish glue], fish teeth ['isnān al-samak], castoreum oil [*khazmīyān], amber, tanned horse hides [*kīmakht], honey, hazelnuts, falcons [ayūz], swords [suyūf], armour, maple wood [ʔ khalanj], Saqālib slaves [raqīq ṣaqālibah], sheep, cattle."²⁶⁰ He adds that "all these come from Bulghār, and they also bring grapes and much oil."²⁶¹ It has been long acknowledged that many of these products actually came through Bulgar from the Rus'.²⁶² The best indicator is the reference to 'isnān al-samak' ('fish teeth'), which are most probably narwhal or walrus tusks imported and widely traded by the Scandinavians in the period all the way from Greenland towards the lands of the Rus' and further East.²⁶³ Many of the furs and Saqāliba slaves must have come from them too

²⁵⁹ On all these, see: Krachkovskiy, *Izbrannye sochineniya*, 210–8; Maqbul and Taeschner, "Djughrāfiya", 582; Muqaddasī's own words on his methodology: BGA II–2, 3–8, 40–3.

²⁶⁰ Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 169–70; original: BGA II–2, 324–5. Here, I have slightly altered the Arabic equivalents: removed words in English brackets and added Arabic designations for fish teeth, swords and Saqālib slaves as Lunde and Stone's edition omits them.

²⁶¹ Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 170; original: BGA II–2, 325.

²⁶² Most recently contextualized in Heinrich Härke and Irina A. Arzhantseva, "Am Südost-Horizont der Wikingerwelt. Die Seidenstraße", in *Die Wikinger. Entdecker und Eroberer*, ed. Jörn Staecker and Matthias Toplak (Berlin: Propyläen, 2019), 298.

²⁶³ Wilhelm Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol invasion*, 2nd ed., trans. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 235–6; Richard Ettinghausen, *Studies in Muslim iconography I. The unicorn* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 1950), 140–1; Jonathan Shepard, "Tzetzes' letters to Leo at Dristra", *Byzantinische Forschungen* 6 (1979): 219–21; James H. Barrett, Natalia Khamaiko, Giada Ferrari, Angélica Cuevas, Catherine Kneale, Anne Karin

as confirmed by Ibn Rusta and Ibn Faḍlān. Thus, it is fair to assume that Khwarazmian swords came from the Rus' through the intermediary Volga Bulgars, who otherwise were not famous for producing and exporting swords.

Khwarazm was on the fringes of Rus' interest but there are a couple of indications that it was linked to their sphere with multiple threads.²⁶⁴ Probably just a few years after Muqaddasī visited Khwarazm, a Rus' delegation arrived there too. It is reported by a native of the Persian Marv, the physician Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marvazī in his *Ṭabā'i' al-ḥayawān* (*The Natural Properties of Animals*). According to Marvazī, four kinsmen of the Rus' king called *vladimir* (apparently misunderstood by Marvazī as a title rather than a personal name), came to visit the Khwarazmshah at some time after their conversion to Christianity. They apparently complained about the Christian faith and were considering to turn to Islam in order to be able to continue their original livelihood based on raiding. Allegedly, the Khwarazmshah “sent someone to teach them the religious laws of Islam”, and they were converted.²⁶⁵ Clearly Marvazī is mistaken on the date of conversion (AH 300/922 CE)²⁶⁶ as it happened in 988 that Vladimir the Great, *knyaz* of the Rus' converted to Christianity, and not much weight should be added to his comment on the Rus' converting to Islam either. However, the PVL confirms that the conversion was preceded by a large-scale inquiry about different faiths in the region.²⁶⁷ Although the tale recorded in the PVL about various envoys trying to impress Vladimir clearly has a fabulous air around it, the fact of a possible inquiry should not be dismissed.²⁶⁸ Marvazī's story in this regard is an independent source and betrays much originality in detail.

Such visits are made sensible from another type of independent evidence. Direct Rus' trips to the region are evidenced by an eleventh-century runestone inscription (Vs 1) found in Västmanland, Sweden, commemorating a man named Slagvi, who died in the East in *karum*, an Old Norse transliteration of the Middle Turkic name for Khwarazm.²⁶⁹ Khwarazm was definitely within the orbit of the Rus' world strengthening the impression that imported swords must come from the Rus', rather

Hufthammer, Albína Hulda Pálsdóttir and Bastiaan Star, “Walrus on the Dnieper: new evidence for the intercontinental trade of Greenlandic ivory in the Middle Ages”, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 289, no. 1972 (2022): 1–9.

²⁶⁴ Such a confirmation is yielded by excavations at the settlement of Dzhanakent in the Syr-Darya delta, linked to the northern networks of trade controlled here by Oghuz'. The town probably served as a distributor hub of slaves, indicated by a thick occupation layer containing keratin-eating microfungi on the North annexe of the town devoid of any buildings or structures. Thus, it was probably used to keep a large number of human beings (slaves) closed together. On this, and the trade routes from the steppes to the Aral Sea in delta of the Syr-Darya and from there to Khwarazm, see: Heinrich Härke and Irina Arzhantseva: “Interfaces and Crossroads, Contexts and Communications. Early Medieval Towns in the Syr-Darya Delta (Kazakhstan)”, *Journal of Urban Archaeology* 3 (2021): 51–63.

²⁶⁵ Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marvazī on *China, the Turks and India*, trans. Vladimir Minorsky (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), 23, 36.

²⁶⁶ Minorsky (trans.), *Marvazī on China, the Turks and India*, 23, 36.

²⁶⁷ PVL 39–49.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus'*, 160–1; Minorsky's commentary in: Minorsky, *Marvazī on China, the Turks and India*, 118–9.

²⁶⁹ Jansson, *Västmanlands runinskrifter*, 8–9; Gustavsson, “Runmonumentet i Rytterne”, 145–9.

than the Volga Bulgars themselves, who are never said to be producing and trading them. Ibn Ḥawqal is also aware of the presence of Saqāliba slaves in Khwarazm, yet as noted, does not know about any swords,²⁷⁰ suggesting that the importation of swords into Khwarazm must really date from Muqaddasī's time.

The Buwayhid chronicler, Miskawayh is the next who takes notice about Rus' swords again, although it is not unequivocal that he alludes to trade. Miskawayh is our main authority on the Rus' campaign against the town of Bardha'ah as noted above. He reports that during funerals the "arms, clothes and equipment" of Rus' warriors are buried with them.²⁷¹ In the last phase of the siege, however a curious episode occurs with these graves when the Muslims retake the town: "After their power had come to an end the Moslems disturbed their graves and brought out a number of swords which are in *great demand to this day* for their sharpness and excellence."²⁷² For the contemporary parts of his history, Miskawayh usually gained his information from reliable eyewitnesses and was closely associated with Buwayhid intellectual circles.²⁷³ In the case of the Rus' attack against Bardha'ah, he interrogated several survivors of the campaign among them a certain man named Abū-'l-Abbās Ibn Nudar.²⁷⁴

What interests us here is his phrase to Rus' swords as being "yatanāfas fihā 'ilā al-yawm" that is "in great demand to this day".²⁷⁵ Although the campaign happened in 943/944, Miskawayh wrote his account much later. The narrative of his *Tajārib al-Umam* (*Experiences of the nations*) ends in 979, but he finished writing the piece only in 982.²⁷⁶ It is obvious from the sentence that his comment on swords being in demand refers to his *own* age (of writing) that is probably the 980s. Indirect support is lent to this by the famous later Arab chronicler, Ibn al-Athīr who for long was thought to be the main authority on the siege of Bardha'ah. After the discovery of the text of Miskawayh it became clear that Ibn al-Athīr was borrowing the description from the former Buwayhid author. He, however, presents the events in a much shorter, condensed form.²⁷⁷ A comparison of the two texts reveals that Ibn al-Athīr's *Al-Kāmil fī-t-Tārīkh* (*The Complete History*) leaves out Miskawayh's own anecdotes

²⁷⁰ BGA II-1, 482.

²⁷¹ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 66.

²⁷² Italics mine. Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 5, 73; original: Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 66.

²⁷³ David Samuel Margoliouth, *Lectures on Arabic historians* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1930), 128; Muhammad Sabir Khan, "Miskawayh and the Buwayhids", *Oriens* 21-22 (1968-1969): 235-47; Muhammad Sabir Khan, "Miskawaihi and Arabic historiography", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89 (1969): 712-3, 727.

²⁷⁴ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 64.

²⁷⁵ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 66.

²⁷⁶ Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "Meskawayh, Abu 'ali Aḥmad", in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2002) <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/meskawayh-abu-ali-ahmad>; Mohammed Arkoun, "Miskawayh." in *El²*, Vol. 7, ed. C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs and Ch. Pellat (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 143.

²⁷⁷ Clément Huart, "Les Mosâfirides de l'Adherbaïdjân", in *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne on his 60th Birthday*, ed. Thomas W. Arnold and Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 239.

from the text (namely those parts where the Persian writer ‘steps in’ the narrative)²⁷⁸ and weeds out any (‘anachronistic’) details not of present-day interest to his twelfth-century audience. This is how parts on the swords look like in the two texts with italics signalling elements excluded by Ibn al-Athīr:

“The followers of Marzuban continued to attack and besiege the Russians *till the latter grew weary*. The epidemic became severe in addition. When one of them died they buried with him his arms, *clothes and equipment, also his wife or some other of his womenfolk, and his slave, if he happened to be attached to him; this being their practice*. After their power had come to an end the Moslems disturbed their graves and brought out a number of swords *which are in great demand to this day for their sharpness and excellence*. When *their numbers were reduced*, they left by night the fortress...”²⁷⁹

Ibn al-Athīr apparently read Miskawayh in the same way as I do: the comment on the sharpness, excellence and competition on the swords was an actuality only for Miskawayh, but not of relevance in Ibn al-Athīr’s own age.

The interpretation of the sentence also fits better the conditions of Miskawayh’s own era. We of course do not know how many swords the Rus’ buried during their one-year stay in Bardha’ah. It would be, however, erroneous to assume that it was a number significant enough to be noticed as circulating in the Muslim world. Even the whys and hows of spoils of victory being passed on within the same society continuously (verbatim “they are competing for these” “*yatanāfas fīhā*” according to the text) would be difficult even to guess. It feels odd to assume that Miskawayh would talk about the exact same swords being sharp and arousing competition in the Islamic world half a century later. It seems a fairer guess that Rus’ swords in general were regarded as excellent in the Islamic world by his time. In light of the *Hudūd* and Muqaddasī the pattern makes much sense.

After these supporting statements about Rus’ trade, we shall verify that such information could truly reach Central Asia. In general terms, the author of the *Hudūd* demonstrates vivid interest in the regions outside the Dār al-’Islām, illustrated by the sheer amount of information – roughly one-third of the text – recorded about them. He was highly concerned with local products and trade movements, and his section on the ‘Turks’ is undoubtedly a valuable part of the account.²⁸⁰ Therefore, there is a

²⁷⁸ Among others he excludes all parts Miskawayh introduces with the personal pronoun ‘I’. Cf. Ibn-el-Athir, *Chronicon quod perfectissimum inscribitur*, Vol. 8, ed. Carolus Johannes Tornberg (Lugduni Batavorum: Brill, 1862), 308–10.

²⁷⁹ The text here is based on Miskawayh’s wording. Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 5, 73. For Ibn al-Athīr’s original consult: Ibn-el-Athir, *Chronicon*, 310.

²⁸⁰ Bosworth, “*Hudūd al-’Ālam*”.

good chance that he had access to some unknown works, or more probably oral testimonies during writing. Such information found its way to the hearts of Islamic Persia and further East also in the time of the Ghaznavids, whose centre was permanently transferred to Ghazna (today Ghazni) not far from Guzgan where the *Hudūd* was written, shortly after its seizure by the founder of the dynasty Alp Tegin in 962.

The Ghaznavids were a Turkic dynasty entering the scene of Islamic history when other dynasties (Samanids, Afrighids, Ziyarids, Buwayhids) slipped into a period of contraction and decline (*Map 3.*).²⁸¹ The first rulers, Alp Tegin and Sebüktegin were slave soldiers (*ghilmān*) of the Samanids and broke away from them in 970s. Their formal independence comes in tandem with the fall of the Samanids, from whom they inherited a Persian administrative system. At the death of their most enigmatic ruler, Sultan Mahmud (998–1030) it was the most extensive empire known since the disintegration of the Abbasid caliphate. The sultanate of Mahmud stretched from Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in the West to the Ganges valley in the East, and from Khwarazm in Central Asia to the Indian Ocean in the south. It was a product of endless warfare, which kept the state alive through the inflow of booties.²⁸²

Due to a megalomaniac intent rather than conviction, Mahmud did everything to establish a world-famous cultural centre in his capital. The dichotomy of his personae is grasped in his way of going about the task: he forced contemporary intellectuals to dislocate from their homes to Ghazna. In spite of the kidnapping of scholars and artists among them al-Bīrūnī, al-Firdawsī, Abū Naṣr, Ibn al-Khammār and briefly even Ibn Sīnā, Mahmud behaved as a patron towards his ‘victims’. By this he acquired a “veritable army of writers, painters, architects, copyists, gilders, historians, painters, and goldsmith from throughout realm.”²⁸³ History writing flourished in this inspiring milieu, but chronicles of the time were closely attached to the life of rulers rather than general matters in the realm.²⁸⁴ Still, scattered information relevant to us shines through these accounts: all major Ghaznavid historians has heard about the Rus’.

The first one chronologically is Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-‘Utbī, called more simply as al-‘Utbī. His work entitled *al-Ta’rīkh al-Yamīnī* (or *al-Kitāb al-Yamīnī*) discusses events

²⁸¹ Bertold Spuler, "The disintegration of the caliphate in the east. The period of the Buyids, Samanids and Ghaznavids", in *Cambridge History of Islam. Vol. 1A. The Central Islamic Lands from pre-Islamic Times to the First World War*, ed. Peter M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 143–74.

²⁸² On the Ghaznavids, see: Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids. Their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran 994–1040* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992); Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "The Early Ghaznavids", in *The Cambridge History of Iran. Vol. 4. From the Arab invasions to the Saljuqs*, ed. Richard Nelson Fyfe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 162–97.

²⁸³ Fredrick S. Starr, *Lost Enlightenment. Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 342–3.

²⁸⁴ Julie Scott Meisami, *Persian historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 49–50 and *passim*.

until 1012 or 1018 and was finished between the years 1022 and 1025.²⁸⁵ The author was closely associated with the person of Sebüktegin and his son, Mahmud, probably as a secretary. Given his eminent position in court, his ‘memoirs’ were easy to compile and is generally trustworthy.²⁸⁶ The *al-Yamīnī* became an extremely popular work, already translated from Arabic to Persian in the twelfth century. The work is preserved today in more than a hundred manuscripts.²⁸⁷ To our advantage, one of these includes a passage of interest to us about the Rus’. The manuscript in question was produced in 1464 and discovered by Bernhard Dorn in the nineteenth century.²⁸⁸ This version of the *al-Yamīnī* adds that during a battle against the forces of Sistan in Herat (probably around 1000), some troops of Sultan Mahmud were equipped with “swords like those of the Rus’”. It reads as follows in Arabic: “*‘ikhtilā’an li-l-rū’s bisuyūf ka-suyūf al-rū’s*”,²⁸⁹ which is confusing enough as it uses the same word twice; Rus’ in the beginning and the end of the sentence. It was deciphered by Dorn on the basis of a marginal note in the manuscript, which clarifies that the “second Rus’ is a place in the vicinity of al-Rūm from where the swords are taken.” The author of the original work was making a ‘joke’ with the two orthographically identical words; one, *ru’ūs* meaning ‘leaders (heads)’ (*‘Häupter’* according to Dorn), the other ‘Rus’.²⁹⁰ The sentence was already known to Togan, who drew the conclusion that Rus’ swords even circulated as far as Ghaznavid Central Asia.²⁹¹

The next of the Ghaznavid historians is Abū Sa’īd Gardīzī, a most “shadowy figure” in the words of Bosworth, as neither of his two fellow contemporary colleagues, namely al-‘Utbi and Bayhaqī seem to know him, despite his claim to escort the sultans to their expeditions.²⁹² The only reference to any dates of his life is given by his dedication of the *Zayn al-akhbār* (*The Ornament of Histories*) to Sultan ‘Abd al-Rashīd (1050–1053). The *Zayn* is a dynastic and general history of Persia from

²⁸⁵ James Reynolds, “Translator’s introduction”, in Al Utbi: *The Kitab-l-Yamini, historical memoirs of the amir Sabaktagin, and the sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, early conquerors of Hindustan, and the founders of the Ghaznavide dynasty*, trans. James Reynolds (London: W. H. Allen and co. 1858), xiv; Andrew C. S. Peacock, “Utbi’s al-Yamīnī: Patronage, Composition and Reception”, *Arabica* 54, no. 4 (2007): 519–20.

²⁸⁶ Clifford E. Bosworth, “Al-‘Utbi”, in *EL*, Vol. 10. ed. P. J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 945; Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, 9–10; Reynolds, “Translator’s introduction”, xiii.

²⁸⁷ Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur*, Vol. 1 (Weimar: Emil Feiber, 1898), 382–3; Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur. Supplement*. Vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 1937), 548; Peacock, “Utbi’s al-Yamīnī”, 500. n. 2.

²⁸⁸ Bernhard Dorn, *Caspia. Über die Einfälle der alten Russen in Tabaristan nebst Zugaben über andere von ihnen auf dem Kaspischen Meere und in den anliegenden Ländern ausgeführte Unternehmungen* (Saint Petersburg: Commissionaires de l’Académie des sciences, 1875), 24.

²⁸⁹ Ahmad ibn ‘Ali Manini and Abu al-Nasr Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbar ‘Utbi, *Hadha Sharh al-Yamini al-Musamma bi-l-Fath al-Wahbi ‘ala Tarikh Abi Nasr al-‘Utbi* (Cairo: Matba‘at al-Wahbiyya, 1869), 357–8.

²⁹⁰ Dorn, *Caspia. Über die Einfälle der alten Russen*, 24; Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (Arabic-English)*, 4th ed., ed. J. Milton Cowan (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), 367; Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Vol. 3 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1968), 995.

²⁹¹ Togan, “Schwerter der Germanen”, 37.

²⁹² Clifford E. Bosworth, “Introduction”, in *The Ornament of Histories. A History of the Eastern Islamic Lands AD 650–1041. The Persian Text of Abū Sa’īd ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Gardīzī*, ed. and trans. Clifford E. Bosworth (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 1.

legendary times onwards, ending its narrative in 1041.²⁹³ It incorporates an appendix on the Turks of ‘Eastern Europe’ (the third chapter), probably instigated by the Turkish origins of the Ghaznavids.²⁹⁴ Gardīzī’s chapter on the Turks was a translation from Jayhānī’s Arabic original to Persian. Question is whether Gardīzī’s additions to the ‘original’ version (in fact to the versions preserved by the other copyists) should be dismissed as inaccurate translations and eleventh-century misunderstandings of the author, or Gardīzī’s version of Jayhānī is actually closer in accuracy to it than other copyists’, including Ibn Rusta.²⁹⁵ The debate is relevant to measure the historicity of Gardīzī’s information on the Rus’. He has a whole ‘new’ paragraph on the Rus’, talking about their “customs tolls on merchants” and “corvées imposed on the Saqlābs”.²⁹⁶ Since other continuators did not incorporate this paragraph into their narrative on the Rus’ and it otherwise conflicts with the preceding information on Rus’ social structures, the passage is probably the author’s own, namely contemporary addition to the text.²⁹⁷ As what regards the Rus’, Gardīzī also adds them to the potential targets of Magyar raids, even though Ibn Rusta’s version only features the Saqāliba there.²⁹⁸ Other than that he copies uncritically the obsolete data on the island and khagan of the Rus’ too, and demonstrates his unawareness of the ‘three towns’ of the Balkhī tradition. His work ethic, thus seems to be similar to that of the *Hudūd*’s author; merging anachronistic and newer information into the text. Parts on the swords remain similar to that of Ibn Rusta, including the “Soleimani swords”.²⁹⁹ All this suggests that although Gardīzī did not know everything, he knew enough: his addition of a whole paragraph bespeaks of his knowledge about the Rus’. Whether this intel came from oral or written sources is all the same: Gardīzī knew who the Rus’ were and was in the possession of necessary resources to widen his spectrum about them.

The third notable Ghaznavid court historian is Abū’l-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn Bayhaqī (995/96–1077). We possess meagre data about his life and career, but he was entitled by twelfth-century a fellow scholar as a “master of secretarial art”, under Sultan Mas‘ūd (1030–1040). His magnum opus was an originally 30-volume complete dynastic history of the Ghaznavids labelled in his age as *Mojalladāt* (Volumes) or *Tārīkh-i Āl-i Sebüktegin* (*The history of the house of Sebüktegin*). His chronicle today, of which not all volumes survived, is called simply as *Tārīkh-i Bayhaqī* (*The History of Bayhaqī*). Its writing began likely in 1018–1019, and was finished in c. 1059.³⁰⁰ Bayhaqī

²⁹³ For an assessment of the whole work, see: Bosworth, “Introduction” in *The Ornament of Histories*.

²⁹⁴ Bosworth, “Introduction” in *The Ornament of Histories*, 2.

²⁹⁵ Göckenjan and Zimonyi (eds.), *Orientalische Berichte*, 40–2.

²⁹⁶ Arsenio P. Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters on the Turks”, *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982): 169.

²⁹⁷ Göckenjan and Zimonyi (eds.), *Orientalische Berichte*, 181. n. 499.

²⁹⁸ Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters”, 161.

²⁹⁹ Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters”, 168.

³⁰⁰ Clifford E. Bosworth, “Introduction”, in *The History of Beyhaqi (The History of Sultan Mas‘ud of Ghazna, 1030–1041) by Abu’l Fazl Beyhaqi. Vol. 1. 421–423 A.H. (1030–1032 A.D.)*, trans. C. E. Bosworth and revised by Mohsen Ashtiany, Ilex Foundation Series, no. 6 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 31–44.

was a reliable historian, who laid an emphasis on methodology by dismissing fairy-tales, and basing his words on official documents, personal observation or reliable informants. One of the latter, a certain Bu'l-Ḥasan b. Delshād witnessed the following story in 1035 and told it to Bayhaqī:

The Amir [Sultan Mas'ūd – my addition] occupied himself here constantly in merry-making and wine-drinking. On Friday, 28 Jomādā I [/10 April 1035] he went to Alhom on the shore of the Sea of Ābaskun. Tents and awnings were set up there, and they drank wine and caught fish. They saw the ships of the Rus, which appear in all places and pass by, without anyone ever being able to get their hands on them, since it is well known that any ship can make for any of the ports they hold.”³⁰¹

Although it has been argued that Bayhaqī was critical to the rule of Mas'ūd and wanted to downplay his personality by presenting him as a man concerning himself only with constant carouse,³⁰² the text in general still gives the impression that the Ghaznavids do not seem to be worried on sight of the Rus' ships. Although the comment that nobody is able to catch them suggests that violence accompanied some of these encounters – like the raids (known from an independent source) in 1030, 1032 and 1033 against Sharvan –,³⁰³ the Rus' seem like regular visitors to the region and are known around all ports. We are at the south-eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, possibly near the mouth of the Gorgan river. The town of Abaskun was a highly flourishing port of trade in the region visited by “merchants from the whole world trading on the Khazar Sea” according to the *Hudūd*.³⁰⁴ It exported shagreen, woollen cloth and various fish.³⁰⁵ The other location, Alhom was a smaller borough but still a “haunt of seaman and merchants.”³⁰⁶ All this makes it quite likely that the Rus' came here to trade. In any case, the Ghaznavids kept sporadic but regular contact with these sailors whether on account of the exchange of goods or that of blows.

Even knowledge about Scandinavia reached the Ghaznavid territories. The most famous polymath of his age, Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī served for long under the Ghaznavids. The Iranian scholar was abducted by Sultan Mahmud in 1017 after the conquest of Khwarazm. The tireless al-Bīrūnī was truly a “one man of academy of sciences” in Ghazna, where he produced his known 180 works. He kept

³⁰¹ Clifford E. Bosworth (trans.) and Mohsen Ashtiany (rev.), *The History of Beyhaqi (The History of Sultan Mas'ud of Ghazna, 1030–1041) by Abu'l Faḍl Beyhaqi. Vol. 2. 424–432 A.H. (1032–1041 A.D.) and the History of Khwarazm*, Ilex Foundation Series, no. 6 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 122.

³⁰² Meisami, *Persian historiography*, 86–105.

³⁰³ Vladimir Minorsky (ed. and trans.), *A History of Sharvān and Darband in the 10th–11th centuries* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1958), 31–2 (Arabic: 9), 47 (Arabic: 20–1).

³⁰⁴ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-'Ālam*, 134.

³⁰⁵ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-'Ālam*, 134.

³⁰⁶ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-'Ālam*, 135.

working even after the death of Mahmud and served his successors loyally.³⁰⁷ It is perhaps not surprising that a man of such erudition as al-Bīrūnī possessed valuable information even about such far-away people as the Scandinavians and Rus'. He was definitely familiar with the latter. In one of his works, he locates them along the Sea of Buntus (the Pontus) in the seventh clime.³⁰⁸ But he is more knowledgeable than that. In his astrological treatise, *Kitāb al-Taḥḥīm*, written in 1025, he is the very first author to use the expression *Warank* for the people inhabiting the shores of a Northern Sea named after them.³⁰⁹ *Warank* is the Arabic form of the term 'Varangian' (OR. *varjag/varjagi*, Gr. *varang/varangoi*, ON. *væring/væringjar*) used in various languages to describe Northern foreigners from Scandinavia active in the East as mercenaries.³¹⁰ Its usage by al-Bīrūnī even precedes the appearance of the term in Byzantine Greek texts. Thus, al-Bīrūnī demonstrates up-to-date (in his age maybe the freshest) information about the people of the North, acquired from interrogating official envoys and travellers arriving in the court of Mahmud in Ghazna. One of these travellers was sent there in 1024 from Volga Bulgharia, and it might have been him who served as al-Bīrūnī's source on the Northerners.³¹¹

Al-Bīrūnī is most important to us, as he also left to posterity the only surviving account on Rus' sword production. He wrote about this in a mineralogical treatise entitled *Kitāb al-jamāhir fī ma'rifat al-jawāhir* (*Book on precious stones and minerals*) in his old age probably during the reign Sultan Mawdud of Ghazna (1041–1050).³¹² The treatise is concerned with the qualities of different minerals and metals, among them iron. In relation to this, the qualities and material of various swords are described. Apparently, Rus' swords are regarded as one of the most important ones, mentioned alongside Byzantine, Slavic, Indian and a couple of local Islamic sword types (Qala'i, Yemeni, Mashrafi, Surayji and Quburi).³¹³ No extra word is devoted to Slavic swords, and only a few more to Byzantines'. Rus' sword production process, however, is described vividly. According to al-Bīrūnī, the Rus' welded blades from a clever combination of two metals, *shāburqān* and *narmāhan*, probably hard and soft iron.³¹⁴ Al-Bīrūnī never witnessed but only heard about the production process from multiple sources. Such hearsay sometimes led people astray, and al-Bīrūnī seem to fall to a fairy-tale

³⁰⁷ About his time and work in court, see: Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, 357–79.

³⁰⁸ Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, *Kitāb al-Taḥḥīm li Awa'il Sina'at al-Tanjīm. The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology. English translation with parallel Arabic /Persian text*, trans. R. Ramsay Wright (London: Luzac & Co., 1934), 211.

³⁰⁹ al-Biruni, *Kitāb al-Taḥḥīm*, 211.

³¹⁰ Adolf Stender-Petersen, "Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes *væringi*, Russ. *vařag*." *Acta Philologica Scandinavica. Tidsskrift for nordisk sprogforskning* 6 (1931–1932): 26–38.

³¹¹ Vladimir Minorsky, "On some of Bīrūnī's informants", in *Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume. A.H. 362–A.H. 1362*. (no ed.) (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951), 233–6.

³¹² Dominique J. Boilot: "Al-Bīrūnī", in *EP²*, Vol. 1, ed. H. A. R. Gibb, J. H. Kramers, E. Lévi-Provençal, J. Schacht, B. Lewis and Ch. Pellat (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 1236.

³¹³ Robert G. Hoyland and Brian Gilmour (ed., trans. and comm.), *Medieval Islamic Swords and Swordmaking. Kindi's treatise "On swords and their kinds"* (Oxford: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2006), 149–55.

³¹⁴ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 149, 153.

about a secret procedure of Rus' smiths. According to the scuttlebutt, during the preparation of iron, the Rus' force ducks to eat small chopped hard iron pieces rolled into powder. Allegedly, after enough repetition, the dung of the ducks would have endowed the iron with better qualities.³¹⁵ The story was dismissed by scholars as unreliable as this process would not have resulted in anything meaningful regarding the actual quality of the metal, like purifying it by removing the slag as some others claimed.³¹⁶ There is, however, a correlation with a Scandinavian source, the thirteenth-century Norwegian *Piðreks saga* where the legendary smith Völundr forges the sword Mimming. Although the source is late in provenance it possibly preserved a much earlier oral tradition. According to the story, in order to improve a sword blade destined for a king, Völundr experiments with filing the sword into small pieces, mixing them with meal and feeding them to starved fowls. The birds' droppings are then melted together in the forge through which all excessive weak iron boils away. The procedure is repeated multiple times until Völundr finds the final product satisfactory.³¹⁷ As Hoyland and Gilmour observes "the two accounts originate 200 years and approximately 5000 km (3200 miles) apart", thus the "story must already have achieved legendary status and circulated widely by the mid-11th century".³¹⁸ Regardless of the factuality of the descriptions, the very specific correlation of two very distant sources is a proof for either the flow of information between the Islamic and Scandinavian milieus or for the existence of what might have been a misunderstood purifying process. The point is that al-Bīrūnī was not only aware of the good qualities of Rus' swords but was keen on acquiring further information about their know-how, and was apparently successful in his task.

The reputation of Rus' swords did not fade with time in the Islamic world. Even in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, scholars definitely read about them on the edges of the Muslim world. An example for this is Fakhr-i Mudabbir, a historian of close Ghaznavid connections. His family claimed descent from Bilge Tegin, one of the *ghilmān* of Alp Tegin. Members of his family probably worked in the Ghaznavid court under Sultan Mahmud, while one of his prominent ancestors was Abū-'l-Faraj, the treasurer to Ibrahim Mas'ūd (d. 491/1098) during the years 1059–1099. His father was also a scholar of note in Ghazna and later in Lahore, where Fakhr-i Mudabbir was also forced to dislocate after 1162 due to the Oghuz' attacks on the realm. He returned to Ghazna in 1187 and got involved in a 13-years long research, consulting more than a thousand books to trace back the genealogy of his family.³¹⁹ His other salient project manifested itself in the genre of 'Mirror for Princes' and was

³¹⁵ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 150.

³¹⁶ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 158–61; cf. Davidson, *The sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, 159–61.

³¹⁷ Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Piðreks saga af Bern*, Vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1951), 97–9.

³¹⁸ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 159.

³¹⁹ About his life and works: Blain Auer, "Fakhr-i Mudabbir", in *El³*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (2012) Consulted online on 16 September 2022: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573->

entitled *Ādāb al-ḥarb wa-l-shajā'a* (*The etiquette of war and valour*). It was dedicated to the Slave King of Delhi Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish (1210–1236 AD) and was written in Lahore or Delhi in India probably after 1229. The *Ādāb* is much concerned with war and warfare, and in one place Fakhr-i Mudabbir enumerates various types of swords wielded in the army of the Delhi Sultanate. Among these are not only Indian and various Islamic sword types, but Chinese (*Chini*), Hispanic (*Firangi*), Byzantine (*Rumi*), probably Khazarian (*Khizri*) and also Rus' (*Rusi*).³²⁰ The factuality of this list is not only doubtful on account of its longevity but also its anachronisms: not only Khazarian but also at least one of the Islamic types, Suleymani (*Sulaimani*), were out-of-date by this time. It is clear, however, from the passage that Fakhr-i Mudabbir dug deep into sword types – whether contemporary or former – as also illustrated by the six different Indian sub-types he makes notice of.³²¹ His biography makes it quite likely that he must have read about the Rus' and their swords during his research in Ghazna (or maybe even in India).

There is another passage, which implicitly might bear relevance to this question, albeit it is admittedly suggestive. According to the *Secret History of the Mongols* (*Mongyol-un niyuca tobci'i'a*), written after the death of Genghis Khan (1227), at some time in the early 1230s, before the start of the great western campaign of Batu and Sübedei, Khan Chagatai, made a claim that the westerners “have sharp swords”.³²² Chagatai bases his words on hearsay (“I am told”),³²³ but given that he was then ruler of most of the Mongol Empire's Islamic lands at the time, he possibly heard this somewhere there (assuming this is a reference to a literal event that happened). He does not name the people of the West in the passage more concretely, but at this time the Rus' were the westernmost neighbours the Mongols had encountered so it seems plausible they were the ones imagined, in some way, here.

Thus, texts about the Rus' and their swords, therefore circulated widely and for long in the Islamic world. There is agreement in a few unrelated Central Asian sources of the period that around the 980s, trade in swords was rising in the Islamic sphere, and that the Rus' had an affiliation to this matter. News about the Rus' and their swords reached the Islamic heartland even in later periods. There is every chance that the author of the *Hudūd*, who actually reports about Rus' sword production and trade in the 980s, received his information on the Kievan sword industry from trustable sources. These could not only derive from written antecedents – historical works and state documents (reports of envoys and state officials) –, but also from the word of mouth. We should not forget that all our

3912_ei3_COM_26926; Clifford E. Bosworth, “Fakr-E Modabber”, in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1999) Consulted online on 10 July 2023: <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/fakr-e-modabber>; Muhammad Sabir Khan, “The life and works of Fakhr-i Mudabbir”, *Islamic Culture* 51 (1977): 127–40.

³²⁰ Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Ādāb al-ḥarb wa-l-shajā'a*, ed. Aḥmad Suhaylī Khvānsārī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Iqbal, 1967), 257.

³²¹ Fakhr-i Mudabbir: *Ādāb al-ḥarb*, 257.

³²² *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Igor de Rachewiltz (Boston: Brill, 2004), 202.

³²³ *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 202.

authors who actually knew the Rus' were somehow connected to at least a few similarly knowledgeable fellows.³²⁴ After strengthening our trust in the factuality of Muslim reports about Rus' swords, it is time to move on to the quality of information hidden in the layers of the sources. In other words: what do we know about the properties of Rus' swords?

What swords?

Swords from the "farthest reaches of the Saqlaba"?

The discussed Islamic texts do not provide in-depth information on Rus' swords, and pose several challenges. They use specific attributives pertaining to swords usually without elaboration probably because these were self-evident to their audiences. In other instances, when their account is lengthier – as in cases of Ibn Khurradādhbih and al-Bīrūnī – the factuality of their intel is hard to test. Nevertheless, some of their expressions are revealing and might illuminate the larger picture if supplemented with additional sources, either archaeological or textual. Let's revisit what our previous authors tell about these Rus' weapons.

Chronologically it is justified to start once again with Ibn Khurradādhbih:

“As for the route of the merchants of the Rus (who are a class of the Saqaliba), they carry beaver (*khazz*) and black fox pelts and swords from the farthest reaches of Saqlaba to the Rumi Sea, where the Lord of the Rum imposes a tithe on them. If they travel by the Tanays, the river of the Saqaliba (the Don), they pass Khamlij, the city of the Khazar, and its lord tithes them. Then they proceed to the Sea of Jurjan (the Caspian) and disembark on any of its shores, at will. The diameter of this sea is five hundred *farsakhs*. Sometimes

³²⁴ Jayhānī's work was well-known in the era and circulated widely. It was consulted by the author of the *Hudūd*, Ibn Rusta and Gardīzī. See, Göckenjan and Zimonyi (eds.), *Orientalische Berichte*. Ibn Faḍlān (and maybe Ibn Rusta) met Jayhānī personally as argued in Montgomery, “Ibn Rusta's lack of eloquence”, 84. Balkhī's geography had a similar tradition, and two of his successors, al-Iṣṭakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal also crossed paths. See, Goeje, “Die Istakhrī-Balkhī Frage”. By his own admission, Muqaddasī read the works of both Jayhānī and Balkhī. BGA Vol. I–3, 3–4. He also possessed some information about the Rus' even though he never left the Dār al-'Islām. He noted that they devastated the land of the Khazars and refers to them as a kind of the Byzantines (*jinshān min al-Rūm*) probably alluding to their alliance against the Muslims in his age. BGA Vol. I–3, 361. As seen above, Ibn Khurradādhbih's *Kitāb* was studied carefully by the continuators of both the Jayhānī and Balkhī traditions. Similar networks are discernible in Central Asia as well. Judging by his notions of history, Bayhaqī probably read Ibn Miskawayh's philosophical treatise, and certainly used al-Bīrūnī's work on Khwarazm. Since he was a contemporary of Gardīzī it would have been striking, if he had not met him in the Ghaznavid court. Bosworth, “Introduction”, in *The History of Beyhaqi*, 40–1, 66–7. Gardīzī once states that he learned information directly from al-Bīrūnī, and his genealogical tables indeed stem from him. Bosworth, “Introduction”, in *The Ornament of Histories*, 1. Thus, scholarly circles in the Muslim world were linked and there is no reason to suppose that the anonymous author of the *Hudūd* (about whom we know nothing) was excluded from all networks.

they bring their goods by camel from Jurjan to Baghdad, and the Saqlab eunuchs translate on their behalf. They claim that they are Christians and pay the *jizya* (poll-tax).

Their Land Route: those on an expedition emerge from al-Andalus or from Firanja and cross to al-Sus al-Aqsa, then proceed to Tanja, Ifriqiya, Egypt, al-Ramla, Damascus, Kufa, Baghdad, Basra, al-Ahwaz, Fars, Kirman, al-Sind, al-Hind, and [finally] to al-Sin. Sometimes they take [the route] behind Rumiyya (Rome?), in the territory of the Saqaliba, on to Khamlij, the city of the Khazar, then by the Sea of Jurjan, to Balkh, Transoxania, the Wurut (the grazing lands, the *Ust-Yurt*) of the Toghuzghuz, and to al-Sin.”³²⁵

Ibn Khurradādhbih’s Rus’ itinerary is extremely precious, but is not unproblematic to interpret. Two questions merit mention in this regard, namely how reliable this description is, and what was the real source and destination of these swords?

The author was chief of the caliphal *barīd* or postal and intelligence service in Jibal then in Samarra and Baghdad, and wrote directly to the caliphs for governmental purposes.³²⁶ His intentions, therefore, are unlikely deceptive. Since Scandinavian activity in the Mediterranean started to intensify in the period (e.g. the attacks on Sevilla in 844 or the coast of Africa, Italy and France in 859–861 as well as Constantinople in 860), it is not unlikely that Ibn Khurradādhbih acquired a flow of reports about their long-range activities.³²⁷

Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that his intel is accurate or was transmitted without misunderstandings. The passage in question, appears in the account conjoined with the itinerary of another long-distance trader group, the Jewish Radhanites. Many scholars postulated that part of the Rus’ itinerary, namely their long land route to the Toghuzoghuz (possibly the Uyghurs) and all the way to al-Sin, that is China, is actually an interpolation into the Rus’ section and originally belongs to the Radhanites. Whether Ibn Khurradādhbih himself or the later copiers of the manuscripts (stemming from the twelfth century)³²⁸ are to be blamed makes no difference. Since there is absolutely no corroborating evidence for the Rus’ reaching Central Asia, let alone China, scholars deviated from what is actually written in the text and explained it away with a scribal or authorial error. However, as Romgard and Montgomery both demonstrated, there is no confusion in the two passages neither manuscript-wise nor in narrative construction. All manuscripts discuss the

³²⁵ James E. Montgomery, “Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources”, in *Living Islamic History. Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 155; original: BGA I–6, 154–5.

³²⁶ Krachkovskiy, *Izbrannye sochineniya*, 168; Maqbul and Taeschner, “Djughrāfiya”, 579; Clifford E. Bosworth, “Ebn Kordādbēh, Abu’l-Qāsem ‘Obayd-Allāh”, *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1997), consulted online 10 July 2023: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ebn-kordadbeh.

³²⁷ Jan Romgard, “Did the Vikings trade with China? On a controversial passage in Ibn Khordādhbeh’s Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms”, *Fornvännen* 111 (2016): 236–7.

³²⁸ Romgard, “Did the Vikings trade with China?”, 231.

Radhanites under a clearly different heading and structure the information logically to a maritime (as well as riverine) and a terrestrial route in the case of both merchant groups. The land route of the Rus' logically follows the previous paragraph ending with the story of Rus' traders disembarking on the Caspian shores and continuing their way on camel backs to Baghdad.³²⁹ Whether they really reached China is of course hard to accept. It is notable, however that they sold their merchandise – possibly not only the furs but also the swords – to the Byzantines and Khazars as well, not only to the Muslims.

The hesitation to attribute the steppe polity of the Khazars as a possible recording market of double-edged swords is due to a difference in fighting style. A dubious episode of the PVL records that the Khazars refused tribute paid by Slavic households in double-edged swords on excuse that they are only accustomed to fight with the lightly curved sabre.³³⁰ Although the story is anachronistic for the ninth century when Slavic people could not have owned double-edged swords in every household, it reflects a real distinctiveness of steppe warfare. The Khazars as nomadic riders fought with lighter sabres which were more suitable for mounted warfare. They might not have been interested in buying double-edged swords for themselves, which can indirectly be supported (albeit only on the *argumentum ex silentio*) by the lack of pertaining archaeological evidence; so far only a single Scandinavian bronze sword chape, found in Danilovka, is known from the Lower Volga region.³³¹ Nevertheless, many of the Muslim mercenaries in Khazar employment,³³² were probably fond of straight blades similarly to their fellow countrymen encountered by Miskawayh a few decades later. At present, I will leave the matter open.

I have a firmer opinion on the origin of the swords. The swords allegedly came “from the farthest reaches of Saqlaba”, which is astonishingly vague. The first guess coming into mind is that it means the Northern parts of European Russia settled by the Scandinavian Rus' and Slavs. Who produced or brought these weapons here, is a question connected to the wider issue of the so-called ‘Varangian- or Normanist-question’, namely what is the correlation between the appearance as well as production of swords in Russia and the arrival of the Scandinavians. It has been pointed out that the joint appearance of swords and distinctive Scandinavian attire (most notably female tortoise brooches) in Russia is hardly a coincidence: swords came to Russia with the Scandinavians. Others argued that the wide distribution of double-edged swords across Europe is not in line with Scandinavian expansion, thus swords in Russia had not much to do with them either.³³³ However, that Slavic craftsmen were extensively involved in the making of double-edged swords is based on dubious examples of alleged

³²⁹ Romgard, “Did the Vikings trade with China?”, 233–6; Montgomery, “Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources”, 156.

³³⁰ PVL 11–2.

³³¹ Androshchuk, “The Vikings in the East”, 523.

³³² On these see the later chapters.

³³³ Hillerdal, “Vikings, Rus, Varangians”, 101; Anne Stalsberg, “Mønstersmidde sverd og varjagerkontroversen”, *Norsk våpenhistorisk selskap. Årbok* 1988 (1989): 11.

Cyrillic letters found on two sword blades.³³⁴ Kirpichnikov identified the famous Hvoscheva sword as a clearly Slavonic product. According to him, Cyrillic inscriptions reading as *kovaľ* ('smith') and Ljudota (Ljudosha) could be witnessed on its blade, which he thought to be the name of the Slavic smith who produced the blade.³³⁵ Upon new inspection, however, Fedir Androshchuk observed that no readable lettering (other than random markings) are discernible on the blade. In addition, the sword itself dates to the late Viking Age indicated by the construction method of the hilt and its decorations, which both point to a Danish production centre or alternatively a Danish smithy in the eleventh-century British Isles. He even raises the possibility that the hilt was constructed even later in the twelfth century.³³⁶ Thus, the Hvoscheva sword falls out of the evidence for Slavic sword production in Russia. This does not preclude of course the participation of locals from the industry, but its domination by Scandinavians is probable. The following sample will illustrate this: Anne Stalsberg found 25 out of 48 graves containing swords to be undoubtedly belonging to Scandinavians, concluding that more than half of the double-edged swords in Russia probably were in their possession.³³⁷ Since it is the Scandinavian material culture only which stands out to in the Russian archaeological record to suggest recognizable ethnic affiliations, the proportion recorded by Stalsberg could be even higher as the rest of the graves – which has none or less clear Scandinavian material elements – could still belong to Scandinavians.

Regardless, sword manufacturing in Russia in the early Viking period is hardly backed up by archaeological evidence. According to Kirpichnikov equipping retinues at eve of the organization of the 'Russian state' would have been impossible, had a native production not been organized.³³⁸ Nevertheless, he could identify only six swords belonging to the ninth century out of more than a hundred he collected in the 1960s.³³⁹ All these early sword types (B, D and some of the E) are Carolingian products or imitations made by Scandinavian craftsmen.³⁴⁰ In addition, the chronology of swords found in Russia usually does not correlate with the proposed dating of the same types from Scandinavia, and shows a later date based on find contexts. It applies also to these early types.³⁴¹ The only secure evidence for the presence of double-edged swords in a ninth-century context comes from

³³⁴ Anatoliy Kirpichnikov, "O nachale proizvodstva mechej na rusi", in *Trudy VI mezhdunarodnogo kongressa slavyanskoi arheologii*, ed. Valentin Vasil'yevich Sedov, Vol. 4 (Moscow: Russkaya Akademiya Nauk, 1998), 246–51.

³³⁵ Anatoliy Kirpichnikov, "Connections between Russia and Scandinavia in the 9th and 10th centuries, as illustrated by weapon finds", in *Varangian problems*, ed. Knud Havnstad, Knud Jordal, Ole Klind-Jensen, Knud Rahbek Schmidt and Carl Stief, Scando-Slavic, Supplementum, no. 1 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1970), 61, 64.

³³⁶ Fedir Androshchuk, "The Hvoscheva sword. An example of contacts between Britain and Scandinavia in the Late Viking Period", *Fornvännen* 98 (2003): 35–43.

³³⁷ Anne Stalsberg, "O proizvodstve mechei epokhi vikingov", *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta* 8, no. 2. (1991): 77.

³³⁸ Kirpichnikov, "Connections between Russia and Scandinavia", 50.

³³⁹ Anatoliy Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie. Vol. 1. Mechi i sabli* (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), 42.

³⁴⁰ Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie*, 26–34, 41–2. Cf. with Androshchuk, who dates E types for the tenth century: Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 52–4.

³⁴¹ Kainov, "Swords from Gnëzdovo"; Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 145–6.

Staraya Ladoga in the form of wooden (practice or toy) swords.³⁴² Islamic sources do not inform us about the swords' real production centres and perceive them as coming from the Slavic lands. However, as we could see the archaeological evidence does not favour an interpretation that swords were actually produced there other than occasionally.

The swords, however, could easily be imported to the Islamic world from, or via, Scandinavia. The quality and origin of weapons produced in Scandinavia before 900 is therefore an important issue. Written records are meagre in this regard, but there is an oft-quoted story recorded by a monk of Sankt Gallen. He alleged that a Scandinavian embassy, presented Louis the Pious as a customary gift with a poor-quality sword, whose inferiority became apparent to the emperor immediately upon close inspection.³⁴³ This example of course does not indicate that all Scandinavian swords were of low quality in the period, and we shall examine the archaeological evidence to get a fuller picture.

The most important area which has been extensively studied is Norway, due its unusually high number of preserved Viking Age swords and spearheads, estimated around 3000 specimen each.³⁴⁴ According to the investigations, more advanced techniques, such as pattern-welding or inscribing letters and signs on the surface of blades, were not practiced in Scandinavia before the Viking Age, and were adopted from Continental Europe.³⁴⁵ Although local smiths certainly manufactured swords and acquired the knowledge of pattern-welding – as shown by a few indigenous spearheads, single-edged swords (a characteristically Scandinavian weapon) and indigenous types of double-edged swords –, the technique remains one of the criteria for the identification of foreign, Frankish weapons into Scandinavia. In addition, Latin letters inscribed on blades, such as HILTIPREHT, INGELRII, or the most famous and widespread ULFBERHT are thought to stand as brand markings for Carolingian swordsmiths, workshops or their ecclesiastical overlords along Rhine.³⁴⁶ These swords were definitely imitated in Scandinavia, however, they – together with non-Nordic decorations (e.g. certain vegetal motifs) and lugs on spear sockets – remain one of the main criteria for identifying imports into Norway. If the artefacts are paired with other foreign objects in the find contexts and their typology illustrates a wider European distribution, the fact of import can be safely established.³⁴⁷

³⁴² Kainov, "Swords from Gnëzdovo", 63.

³⁴³ *Monachi Sangallensis de Gestis Karoli Imperatoris*, MGH SS Vol. 2, ed. Georg H. Pertz (Hannover: Hahn, 1829), 761.

³⁴⁴ Anne Stalsberg and Oddmunn Farbregd, "Why so many Viking Age swords in Norway?", *Studia Universitas Cibiniensis Series Historica Supplementum* 1 (2011): 47–52; Irmelin Martens, "Indigenous and imported Viking Age weapons in Norway – a problem with European implications." *Journal of Nordic Archaeological Science* 14 (2004): 127.

³⁴⁵ Cf. Stalsberg, "O proizvodstve mechei epokhi vikingov".

³⁴⁶ For the collection of the different ideas, see: Ingo Petri, "ULFBERHT swords: Origin, material and manufacture", *History Compass* (2019): 1–12.

³⁴⁷ Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 175–88; Bergljot Solberg, "Weapon Export from the Continent to the Nordic Countries in the Carolingian Period", *Studien zur Sachsenforschung* 7 (1991): 241–59; Martens, "Indigenous and imported", 127–31; Heiko Steuer, "Der Handel der Wikingerzeit zwischen Nord- und Westeuropa aufgrund archäologischer Zeugnisse", in *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, Vol. 4, ed.

Based on this, Norwegian archaeologists located Carolingian weapons imported into Scandinavia in the coastal areas of the country in and around places with excess to ports.³⁴⁸

Fedir Androshchuk's monograph on Viking Age swords inserts the Swedish material into the larger picture. A chronological division based on hilt shapes identifies the following types in Scandinavia belonging to the Early Viking Age (c. 750–870): Petersen type B, C, special type 1 and 2 (or Mannheim type), K, D1, H/I and probably K1. All of these, except the indigenous Norwegian type C, were Frankish types, nevertheless B, D1 and H/I were also imitated by Scandinavian craftsmen.³⁴⁹ Since H/I swords were the most common type in Scandinavia and were continuously used in the tenth century as well, the dating of these swords has to depend on individual find circumstances. The larger picture, is apparent: local sword hilts were extremely rare. Apart from the mentioned type C, which is almost exclusive for Norway (and even that developed from Carolingian B type), only one or two specimen of type E swords (becoming common in the tenth century) can be classified as a local product before the 900s'.³⁵⁰

The magnitude of imported weapons, however, is debated in archaeological literature. Most scholars argued for the majority of weapons being imports into the Scandinavian countries.³⁵¹ However, no statistics can really be achieved due to the difficulties of dating specific hilt types based on either style or find circumstances, and the discrepancies between the dating of hilts and blades as well as between the time of manufacture and the deposition in the ground.³⁵² The sheer magnitude of known specimen and their uneven publication (both in terms of quality and availability)³⁵³ would also restrict to achieve a numerical result. The rare occurrence of pattern-welding and inscriptions on swords of local type, however, indicates that high quality sword production in Scandinavia was in its infancy in the ninth century, and the majority of fine weapons probably came from the continent. Birka, for instance, was the foremost centre maintaining contacts with the East, yet the ninth-century stratigraphic layers of the town barely yielded weapons.³⁵⁴

These conclusions about the lack or low volume and quality of Scandinavian sword production in the ninth century, correlate with the written evidence. The Carolingians constantly issued embargoes

Klaus Düwel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987) 153–5; Michael Müller-Wille, "Zwei karolingische Schwerter aus Mittelnorwegen", *Studien zur Sachsenforschung* 3 (1982): esp. 149–50.

³⁴⁸ Solberg, "Weapon Export from the Continent"; Martens, "Indigenous and imported", 129–31.

³⁴⁹ Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 38–46, 64–66, 169–70; cf. Michael Müller-Wille, "Ein neues Ulfbert-Schwert aus Hamburg. Verbreitung, Formenkunde und Herkunft", *Offa* 27 (1970): 72–3; Müller-Wille, "Zwei karolingische Schwerter", 105–49.

³⁵⁰ Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 46–7, 52–4.

³⁵¹ Martens, "Indigenous and imported"; Holger Arbman, *Schweden und das Karolingische Reich. Studien zu den Handelsverbindungen des 9. Jahrhunderts* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1937), 215–35; Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie*, 37.

³⁵² With further literature: Steuer, "Der Handel der Wikingerzeit", 152–3; Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 144–6.

³⁵³ Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 20–8.

³⁵⁴ Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 207–17.

on the export of Frankish weapons to pagan Europe. Six of these capitularies, produced in the eighth and ninth centuries, express anxiety over the expropriation of Frankish horses, mail coats, leg guards and swords by the Spanish (Moors), Saxons, Britons, Avars, Slavs and Scandinavians. The provisions principally tried to ban the sale of said items to pagan merchants, mostly on the eastern borders of the empire. Two of the edicts are relevant for our purposes. The first one, issued in 811 during the reign of Charlemagne in Boulogne forbids to bishops, abbots or any other man in possession of a local armoury to provide *bruniae* (mail coats) or swords to any foreigners without the permission of the central authorities.³⁵⁵ The second one, the *Edictum Pistense* promulgated by Charles the Bald in 864 is even more specific in identifying the *Nortmanni*, to whom whoever donates (*donaverit*) “a mail coat or any weapons or a horse” (*bruniam vel quaecumque arma aut caballum*) is subject to death sentence.³⁵⁶

It has been argued, however, that the capitularies cannot be taken as proof for the sale of Carolingian weapons abroad. According to Horn Fuglesang, both the edicts of 811 and 864, which can be connected to viking activities, namely restrict their obtaining of weapons once they are already in the land. The prime motivation of the capitularies was to prevent vikings from turning their own weapons against the Franks rather than limiting their exports to Scandinavia.³⁵⁷ This, however, does not rule out that Frankish weapons could arrive to Scandinavia through illegal means. Vikings could get hold of Frankish weapons, among them swords, through ransom, plunder and illegal exchange, i. e. smuggling. Indeed, the verb *donaverit* in the *Edictum Pistense* alludes to ransom as the possible means of exchange. Although a handful of Frankish swords with the inscription ULFBERHT in Scandinavia are counterfeited items, the majority must have arrived from Carolingian Frankia as contrabands.³⁵⁸ Thus, a possibility of a subsequent circulation of Frankish weapons within pagan Europe and even the Caliphates is raised rightfully even for the early periods.³⁵⁹

The Rus’ did not refrain either from such illegal activities either. This might be captured in a description of Rus’ merchants along the Volga carrying ‘Frankish’ (*’ifranjīya*) swords,³⁶⁰ although, as will be shown below, this designation was vague enough to include weapons manufactured in Scandinavia, which conformed to Frankish blades. However, tricking tollers to extort prerogatives is

³⁵⁵ *Legum sectio II. Capitularia regum Francorum*, Vol. 1, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hannover: Hahn, 1883), 167.

³⁵⁶ *Legum sectio II. Capitularia regum Francorum*, Vol. 2, ed. Alfred Boretius and Victor Krause, MGH Capit. 2 (Hannover: Hahn, 1897), 321.

³⁵⁷ Horn S. Fuglesang, “Skriftlige kilder for karolingisk våpeneksport til Scandinavia”, *Collegium Medievale* 13 (2000): 180–2.

³⁵⁸ Sven Kalmring, “Of Thieves, Counterfeiters, and Homicides. Crime in Hedeby and Birka”, *Fornvännen* 105 (2010): 285–6.

³⁵⁹ Kirpichnikov, “Connections between Russia and Scandinavia”, 61, 64; Stalsberg, “Swords from the Carolingian Empire”, 268–70.

³⁶⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1.

testified safely by Ibn Khurradādhbih, according to whom Rus' merchants pretended to be Christians in order to pay the Muslim poll-tax (*jizya*) and trade freely in Baghdad.³⁶¹ Thorough searches, such as those conducted in the tenth century by Byzantine agents on Rus traders – requiring to enter the gates of Constantinople unaccompanied and unarmed whilst their cargo was supervised in a designated place outside the city walls³⁶² – were probably best avoided. Since according to Ibn Khurradādhbih, both the Byzantines and the Khazars inflicted a ten-percent tithe on Rus' traders, smuggling and tackling authorities might have been a primary goal for merchants. This might have prompted them to develop alternative river routes to certain destinations.³⁶³

Restrictions by authorities on illegal trade are seldom successful in liquidating the entire black-market sector. The continuous issuing of provisions shows this resolute but probably futile attempt on part of the Carolingian royal authorities.³⁶⁴ The appearance of these prohibitions is quite consistent with the flourishing of an eastern sword trade conducted by the Radhanites and the Rus' from the mid-ninth century. An intensification in Rus' sword trade is perhaps indicated by the concrete denomination of the 'Northmen' in the capitulary of 864, as well as the severe – previously unprecedented – punishment assigned for collaborators. In spite of this, swords continued to Scandinavia. According to archaeological scrutiny, many of the swords there received a befitting handle on site, which do suggest that naked blades were rather imported than coming in as spoils.³⁶⁵

Thus, the only possible source of good quality swords in the period lay in the Frankish kingdoms which likely was the ultimate source of Scandinavian arm dealers feeding their cargo into the eastern trade networks through “the farthest reaches of Saqlaba”.

Sulaymānīya and/or 'ifranjīya swords

As we have seen above, a large-scale sword export was likely unfounded for the opinion of Jayhānī and Ibn Rusta in the beginning of the tenth century. This is the possible reason why they omitted it from their descriptions. Clear chronological markers are difficult to set up between Ibn Khurradādhbih and the *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naftsa*'s 'Eastern European dossier', as the latter preserved a snapshot of the territory in the 870–880s', but the former's precise dating is elusive. It is hard to say, therefore, in what sequence one should read the two accounts.

³⁶¹ BGA I–6, 154.

³⁶² PVL 24.

³⁶³ Katona, *Vikings of the steppe*, 70–2.

³⁶⁴ McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 732–3.

³⁶⁵ McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 732.

Nevertheless, Ibn Rusta's words on Rus' swords are interesting. According to him, the Rus' "use 'Sulaymān' swords' (*as-suyūf as-sulaymānīya*)".³⁶⁶ The expression puzzled historians. On the one hand, explanatory references connect it to King Solomon from the *Qu'ran*,³⁶⁷ and thus regard the passage as a *topos*. Such was the opinion of Minorsky for instance.³⁶⁸ On the other hand, most commentators of the text hesitate to dismiss the expression and seeks to identify the locality where this special sword type was produced based on the treatise of al-Kindī'. They reach quite different results. Watson, without explanation, believes it to be a Khazar type,³⁶⁹ while Lunde and Stone envision the origin of them in "the Salmān district of Khurāsān".³⁷⁰ De Goeje thought it was a Frankish sword type.³⁷¹ The Russian orientalist Daniel Chwolson had the same opinion as de Goeje, although he noted the Koranic references and also the district of Salmān as a possible source (only to dismiss it).³⁷² Others, such as Göckenjan and Zimonyi acts in tandem with Chwolson to offer all possibilities, but take no sides.³⁷³ Togan admitted that identifying the expression with a concrete place is chaotic, and therefore looked for evidence elsewhere; he regarded *sulaymānīya* swords as essentially Frankish based on Ibn Faḍlān's identification of Rus' swords as Frankish.³⁷⁴ Likely it was the Arabic diplomat's description, which was behind de Goeje's and Chwolson's idea as well. The two texts – due to a shortage of other control sources – were read together rather than contrasted. Only Hraundal compares the two, and explains the discrepancy as an indication for the existence of two distinct groups of Rus' or the mutual presence of both sword types in the armament of contemporary Rus'.³⁷⁵

The only other author apart from Ibn Rusta and al-Kindī who uses the same expression to swords is the eleventh-century Omar Khayyam, in relation to gifts brought to Persian rulers on the holiday of Nowruz. He enumerates fourteen sword types, among which the *sulaymānīya* is the fifth.³⁷⁶ Since the only other source which is contemporary to Ibn Rusta and by its detailedness can illuminate the

³⁶⁶ BGA I–7, 146.

³⁶⁷ Al-Bīrūnī explains that it is "usual with the people to associate everything that is strange to the Prophet Solomon as he held sway over powerful djinns, who were very skilled divers and craftsmen." *Al-Beruni's Book on Mineralogy. The Book Most Comprehensive in Knowledge on Precious Stones*, ed. Hakim Mohammed Said (Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1998), 58.

³⁶⁸ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-'Ālam*, 437; A Hungarian scholar regards the expression as a mere idiom for an "all-destroying sword": Gyula Szvák and Sándor Szili Sándor (eds.), *A normannkérdés az orosz történelemben. I. Források* (Debrecen: Russica Pannonicana, 2009), 140 n. 13.

³⁶⁹ William E. Watson, "Ibn Rustah's Book of Precious Things: A Reexamination and Translation of an Early Source on the Rūs", *Canadian American Slavic Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 292 and 297.

³⁷⁰ Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of Darkness*, 234 n. 30.

³⁷¹ Michael J. de Goeje: "Glossarium", in BGA I–8, xxv–xxvi.

³⁷² Daniel A. Chwolson, *Izvestiya o khazarakh, burtasakh, mad'yarakh, slavyanakh, i russakh Abu-Ali Akhmeda ben Omar Ibn-Dasta, neizvestnago dosele arabskago pisatelya nachala X veka* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk, 1869), 195–7.

³⁷³ Göckenjan and Zimonyi (eds.), *Orientalische Berichte*, 83 n. 156.

³⁷⁴ Togan, "Schwerter der Germanen", 28–9.

³⁷⁵ Hraundal, *The Rus in the Arabic sources*, 102.

³⁷⁶ Omar Khayyām Nishābūrī, *Nowrūz nāmāh*, ed. Mojtaba Minovi (Tehran: Kaveh bookshop, 1933), 36.

issue is al-Kindī, I think no explanation should deviate far from him. Al-Kindī was an expert on swords and also contemporary to Ibn Rusta, which makes him an authority on the matter. Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī's *Al-suyūf wa-aynāsuhā* (*On swords and their kinds*) was written between 833–842 on behalf of Caliph al-Mu'taṣim. The caliph wanted to fully equip his army of Turkic slave soldiers which might have prompted him to entrust al-Kindī with the task of collecting available information on weaponry. Al-Kindī as a true scientist based his understanding on empirical observations. His determination to faithfully execute the caliph's request is confirmed by the Istanbul manuscript of his treatise, which explicitly says that he acquired the information from watching and talking to swordsmiths.³⁷⁷ Since there are only a handful of medieval Islamic swords preserved in the archaeological record worldwide,³⁷⁸ al-Kindī's treatise is indispensable for any study of swords in the period.

There is a great confusion, however, in al-Kindī's work between *sulaymānīya* and *Salmānīy* swords, which seem to be two distinct types. Since the manuscripts do not always contain vowels and accents, any mentions to these sword types are distinguished in modern editions somewhat arbitrarily.³⁷⁹ It is clear, however, that *sulaymānīya* swords are discussed separately from the ones from Salman, as the latter deserved an own heading. The detailed description of the *sulaymānīya* swords, in contrast, appear in a section together with European ones, which the text calls Frankish (*al-'ifranjīya*).³⁸⁰ The reason for grouping them together stems from their similar manufacturing process; both are composite blades made of soft and hard iron.³⁸¹ Their physical qualities are also somewhat similar. This is what we read about the *sulaymānīya* swords:

The iron of the Sulaymāni [swords] is like the iron of the Frankish swords, except that it is yellow of ornamentation, more lustrous, and more foreign of manufacture. The first and last part of the sword are even, not tapered. If the head is very fine at the bottom, then it is only slightly watered. There is no image or cross on it. Their tangs resemble the tangs of the Yemeni. Thus also are the tangs of the Frankish swords, except that [the Frankish ones] have more amply endowed tangs and all their good qualities are equal.³⁸²

³⁷⁷ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 7.

³⁷⁸ Abdel Rahman Zaky, "Medieval Arab arms", in *Islamic Arms and Armour*, ed. Robert Elgood (London: Scholar Press, 1979), 202–12.

³⁷⁹ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 19 n. 12, 45 n. 73, 57 n. 34; Fehér Bence, *Források a korai iszlám kardművesség történetéhez*, *Studia Classica*, no. 2 (Piliscsaba: PPKE, 2000), 27. n. 14, 18; James W. Allan, *The metalworking industry in Iran in the early Islamic period*. Vol. 1, PhD thesis (Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, 1976), 83–5, cf. 426.

³⁸⁰ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 44–5.

³⁸¹ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 23.

³⁸² Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 45.

A close comparative reading with the Frankish swords reveals important differences between those and the *sulaymānīya*. There is divergence, for instance in the patterns of the blades: whilst Frankish swords are pattern-welded (“look like Tabari rivers”) as well as “white of ornamentation and red of ground” during etching, the surface of *sulaymānīya* blades looks more “strange/foreign/rare” as well as lustrous, and their colouring is yellowish. The form of the blades is also dissimilar: Frankish swords have fine, tapering heads, whilst the shape of the *sulaymānīya* is even. As the description states plainly, Frankish swords are recognizable also from their “more amply endowed tangs” in comparison to the *sulaymānīya*. Moreover, Frankish swords have a fuller. A last, vividly recognizable attribute of such swords is their inscriptions, mostly in the form of an image or cross, which the *sulaymānīya* blades lack.³⁸³ This is also confirmed by archaeological evidence in Russia, where circles, crosses and other square-shaped forms are frequently noted on blades.³⁸⁴ These suggest that it was possible for an Arabic observer to recognize different sword types.

This is further supported by the case of Ibn Faḍlān. He was obviously less interested in swords than al-Kindī, nevertheless his observation on Rus’ swords fits the latter’s classification. According to him, the Rus’ “use Frankish (*’ifranjīya*) swords with broad, ridged (*mushaṭṭaba*) blades.”³⁸⁵ The translation of Lunde and Stone gives a slightly different rendering: “Their swords are broad bladed and grooved like the Frankish ones.”³⁸⁶ The text is not unequivocal. Some other commentaries to the Arabic original are in line with Lunde and Stone claiming that the Rus’ blades were only ‘similar’ (but not identical) to Frankish ones.³⁸⁷ A distinguished historian of Frankish history, Simon Coupland, in contrast, used the passage as a proof for illustrating the wide circulation of Frankish swords.³⁸⁸ Whether these swords were actually Frankish or just similar to the Frankish ones from the point of view of Ibn Faḍlān is less of a concern now. It is more revealing that the recognizable features of Frankish swords – according to him – were the wide/broad shape of their blades and their fullers. Both attributes are also noted by al-Kindī.³⁸⁹ There were other features of contemporary Frankish blades which proved memorable to other Islamic scholars as well apart from al-Kindī. The famous late tenth-century Islamic scholar al-Nadīm notes in his *Kitāb al-Fihrist (The Book Catalogue)* that the writing of the Rus’ resembles those of the Greek script, and may have been seen on Frankish

³⁸³ The description of the Frankish swords: Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 44.

³⁸⁴ Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie*, 126 and Fig. 37.

³⁸⁵ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1. The Arabic is my addition.

³⁸⁶ Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 45–6.

³⁸⁷ Ibn Faḍlān, *Beszámoló a volgai bolgárok földjén tett utazásról*, ed. Puskás Ildikó, trans. Simon Róbert, *Fontes Orientales* (Budapest: Corvina, 2007), 85–6 n. 293.

³⁸⁸ Simon Coupland, “Carolingian arms and armor in the ninth century”, *Viator* 21 (1990): 44.

³⁸⁹ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 43.

blades.³⁹⁰ This was one of the hallmarks of Frankish blades also according to al-Kindī, and indeed many double-edged swords found in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine is inscribed.³⁹¹

Thus, even if not unmistakably, characteristics of Frankish swords were probably recognizable to the educated Islamic elites. Frankish swords were well-known in the Islamic world by this time, and not only through trade with the Radhanites (and possibly the Rus') but also through gifts. In 905–906, Bertha of Tuscany, for instance, sent “fifty swords, fifty shields, and fifty lances of the type used by the Franks” to the Abbasid caliph al-Muktafi (902–908).³⁹² Swords were also paid as ransom to the Arabs; according to the *Annales Bertiniani*, the “Saracens” demanded, among others, 150 swords for the release of Archbishop Roland of Arles in 869.³⁹³

My point is that our confidence should be strengthened in Ibn Rusta's (or his source's) observance of the Rus' wielding a special sword type, *sulaymānīya*, as Islamic observers demonstrated the ability of recognizing Frankish swords. Since al-Kindī's *sulaymānīya* were markedly different from these, we should entertain the possibility that the Rus' did not wield Frankish swords in the 870s', or at least not only wielded those. The exact origin of the *sulaymānīya* is naturally hard to decipher as it is not only a matter of palaeography but also finding the territory on a map. The modern English translators of al-Kindī, Hoyland and Gilmour, follow Asimov and Bosworth in looking for the Sulayman mountains in southern Afghanistan/Pakistan south of Kandahar,³⁹⁴ whilst Togan was hesitant whether the word was more related to Salmān (which appears in al-Kindī's text) or the Indian Nilemān/Bilemān.³⁹⁵ The point of agreement is only in that *sulaymānīya* swords were Central Asian in origin. Unfortunately, it is impossible to prove that the Rus' indeed bought Islamic swords by this time. However, such cases were not out of precedent later, surmised by a short comment of al-Bīrūnī that steel (*fūlādh*) produced by the Arabs does not stand the harshness of Nordic winters and breaks there with a single blow.³⁹⁶ This accidental comment makes it quite likely that Islamic swords were acquired by the Rus' latest around the mid-eleventh century when al-Bīrūnī wrote his piece. The information might pertain to an even earlier period as al-Bīrūnī's description of Rus' sword production describes a thoroughly perfected manufacturing procedure, whose experiments must have considerably pre-dated the time of its know-how by the Arabs. That no Islamic swords are known from Scandinavia or the Rus' should not deter us as these weapons are extremely rare even in their

³⁹⁰ *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm. A tenth-century survey of Muslim culture*. Vol. I, ed. and trans. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 38.

³⁹¹ Kirpichnikov, “Connections between Russia and Scandinavia”, 61–4.

³⁹² Quoted in: McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 733 n. 26.

³⁹³ *Annales Bertiniani*, 106.

³⁹⁴ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 19 n. 12.

³⁹⁵ Togan, “Schwerter der Germanen”, 28.

³⁹⁶ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 153.

homelands; only a handful of specimen are known across the globe, and as far as I know none can be dated to the ninth-tenth centuries.³⁹⁷

In any case, by the tenth century, this must have changed. Arms trade with the Frankish realms did not cease in the tenth century either, but by this time a large-scale presence of swords is witnessed in Scandinavian centres and rural sites suggesting widespread local manufacture and repair. Sword types prevalent from the early tenth century onwards and showing minimal or no continental connections include Petersen type E, I and K2 (as well as perhaps K3). After 900 CE, swords apparently not spreading in continental Europe appear also in the eastern centres around the upper and middle Dnieper and its tributaries as well at sites like Gnezdovo, Kiev and Shestovitsa.³⁹⁸ Around 20 swords bearing the famous inscription ULFBERHT are recorded in Russia. Most of them confines to the original spelling +VLFBERH+T, thought to be witnessed on the best quality blades. However, the variations testify that such swords were also imitated outside the Frankish realm.³⁹⁹ One such serious misspelling occurs on a blade of Petersen type W from Gnezdovo (dating probably from the second half of the tenth century), which reads as VLEN (combining the starting V and L letters as on other ULFBERHT specimen).⁴⁰⁰ The complications of identifying the origin of Rus' swords by this time is perhaps illustrated by a sword found in one of the earliest Scandinavian settlements, Sarskoe Gorodische in Northern Rus'. The sword is of Petersen type E, which is found nowhere on the Continent and is therefore undoubtedly a Scandinavian product. It was prominent in the tenth century. Yet, it turned out from a ninth-century layer and bears the Latin inscriptions +LVNVECIT+ (*Lun fecit*) on one side and a possible Christian shortcut interpreted as a *In nomine Iesus* on the other.⁴⁰¹ Thus, earlier swords might have been in use for a longer time in Rus' territories (Ibn Rusta also asserts that swords were passed onto Rus' children probably as inheritance⁴⁰²); they were either repaired or refitted with new handles with time.

Five swords, four of them bearing the inscription ULFBERHT, were recovered from the former territories of the Volga Bulghar state. They all belong to tenth-century types E and S, and were carried there by Scandinavians. One of them appeared deliberately bended from the famous Balymer kurgans, which on the basis of the ritual was argued to be the resting place of a Scandinavian/Rus' retinue.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁷ Rahman A. Zaky, "Introduction to the study of Islamic Arms and Armour", *Gladius* 1 (1961): 17–29; Zaky, "Medieval Arab arms", 203–6.

³⁹⁸ Androschuk, *Viking swords*, 52–4, 60–6, 171–2; Kainov, "Swords from Gnëzdovo".

³⁹⁹ Müller-Wille, "Ein neues Ulfbert-Schwert", 72, 76, 90 and Nr. 82–98.; for the best quality +VLFBERH+T swords, see later the works of Alan Williams.

⁴⁰⁰ Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie*, 33 and 125, Table XVII/3.

⁴⁰¹ Sergei Yu. Kainov, "Novyye dannyye o meche s Sarskogo gorodishcha", *Voyennaya arkheologiya* 2 (2011): 147–52.

⁴⁰² BGA I–7, 145.

⁴⁰³ Kirpichnikov Anatoliy and Iskander Izmailov: "Karolingskie mechi iz Bulgarii (iz fondov Gosudarstvennogo ob'yedinennogo muzeya Respubliki Tatarstan)", in *Srednevekovaia Kazan': Vozniknovenie i razvitie. Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferencii, Kazan', 1–3 iunia 1999 goda*, ed. K. Sh. Iskhakov, R. S. Khakimov, M. A. Usmanov and F. Sh. Khuzin (Kazan': Master Lain, 2000), 207–18.

A chance probably really presented itself for Ibn Faḍlān to witness Rus' swords, and the ambiguity of his report whether these are Frankish or 'like the Frankish' ones is unimportant as the Rus' could not only use both Frankish and Scandinavian swords but the distinction between these was hardly apparent for the naked eye given their similar modelling.

Thus, Scandinavians and Rus', wielded swords manufactured in diverse places across the Viking and Carolingian world in the tenth century. However, it seems that swords carried by the Rus' were markedly different by this time in contrast to the 870s', and, as visible in Miskawayh's praise, the excellence of these was widely recognized by the mid-tenth century. The recognition was probably not confined to the Islamic world as the Byzantine historian Leo the Deacon's text suggests. Almost contemporary to Miskawayh, Leo the Deacon accounts regarding the final battles around Dorostolon in 971 that Bardas Skleros, after the Byzantine victory over the Rus', captured a vast number of swords.⁴⁰⁴ These must have been equally valuable as the ones dug up from the graves at Bardha'ah if Leo had to mention their accumulation.

Swords produced in Rus'

Although a small-scale manufacture perhaps for local use in the Rus' is most probable for (especially the second half of) the tenth century, large-scale production and distribution for export is neither supported by the archaeological nor the written sources before the 980s'. The turning point is marked by the *Ḥudūd*'s statement that Rus' swords are unequivocally produced in Rus', namely Kiev and the mysterious Urtāb.

An added point to the *Ḥudūd*'s trustworthiness is sought in the qualitative information it presents. Archaeological research confirmed that blades and handles were manufactured sometimes separately, and not necessarily in the same workshop.⁴⁰⁵ This is probably the reason behind Urtāb's differentiation as a place of both blade and sword production centre compared to Kiev which seemingly forged intact specimen only or assembled parts into a final product to offer these for sale.

That the swords manufactured in Urtāb were from a flexible raw material allowing them to be bent in two and rebound into their former state is also founded in written sources. As already noted by Davidson, the most famous parallel is found in the work of a monk of the Frankish Sankt Gallen monastery. According to the Frankish source, Louis the Pious tested viking blades in a similar vein only to find the first sword gifted to him as too stiff (thus of poor quality), and was satisfied only with

⁴⁰⁴ Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, ed. Karl B. Hase, CSHB, no. 11 (Bonn: Weber, 1828), 155.

⁴⁰⁵ Kirpichnikov, "Connections between Scandinavia and Russia", 64; Martens, "Indigenous and imported", 127; Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 100–6, 175.

a second sword offered to him by one of the Scandinavian envoys.⁴⁰⁶ A thirteenth-century Arabic writer, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī alluded to the same sword test when noted that Frankish swords are so excellent that nothing stands against their strikes whilst at the same time they bend like paper.⁴⁰⁷ Such sword tests are performed in a couple of Scandinavian and Irish sources as well. References in Icelandic sagas make it evident that too soft blades had to be strengthened underneath the feet of combatants during battle. Thus, a desired sword had to be both flexible and durable.⁴⁰⁸ Further proof is lent to this by al-Bīrūnī who describes what might be pattern-welding: “The Russians used to make [the edges of] their swords from shāburqān and the channels in the middle of them from narmāhan so that they might be firmer when striking and less liable to break.”⁴⁰⁹ Sources produced in such diverse environments and across a large timespan is a firm indication for the soundness of the *Hudūd*’s statement on the qualities of Rus’ swords. Testing a sword like this is probably a basic human instinct. A revealing story was recorded upon the discovery of a viking sword from the island of Khoritsa on the Dnieper in 2011: the fishermen who stumbled on the object, probably instigated by the antiqueness of their catch, immediately tried to bend it on their knees to measure its flexibility and firmness.⁴¹⁰

Although there is nothing inherently wrong in the assumption that workshops in Rus’ were equipped for repairing, assembling or even producing swords already from the early tenth century, a larger production is unattested in the archaeological record. Local production earliest could start from the mid-tenth century. In the second half of the tenth century, the number and variety of swords (including type H, X, W, Y, T, V, and Z) significantly increases for instance in Gnezdovo, where the largest concentration of such weapons is found. Sergei Kainov explains this by two possibilities, namely an extensive sword import or the organisation of local sword manufacture.⁴¹¹ Since the former is undocumented in the written record, his second suggestion is much more convincing. Some of these late types, in addition, seem to cluster in Kiev and on an East-West axis of riverine routes from the town.⁴¹²

It is even possible that some late sword handles (esp. Petersen type Y and Z) with curved hilts were developed in Rus’ and spread from there. These late tenth- or early eleventh-century types were developed on response to the threat of nomadic cavalry. They were allegedly better suited for

⁴⁰⁶ *Monachi Sangallensis*, 761.

⁴⁰⁷ Quoted in: Togan, “Schwerter der Germanen”, 29.

⁴⁰⁸ For all these: Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, 116–7; cf. Androshchuk, *Viking swords*, 176.

⁴⁰⁹ Hoyland and Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*, 153.

⁴¹⁰ M. A. Ostapenko and V. D. Sarychev, “Znakhidka mecha X ct. bilya Khortytsi (do pytannya pro pokhid knyazya Svyatoslava «v porohy» 972 r.)”, *Arkheolohiya* 3 (2016): 56. Modern bending investigations are also one of the modes of testing blades: Alan Williams, *The Sword and the Crucible. A History of the Metallurgy of European Swords up to the 16th Century*, History of Warfare, no. 77 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 82.

⁴¹¹ Kainov, “Swords from Gnëzdovo”, 63.

⁴¹² Gleb S. Lebedev, “Rus’ Ryurika, Rus’ Askol’da, Rus’ dira?”, in *Starozhytnosti Rusi–Ukrayiny. Zbirnyk naukovykh prats*, ed. P. P. Tolochko (Kiev: Kiev’ska Akademiya Ahrobiznesu, 1994) 147–9.

thrusting and mounted warfare which advocated to counter the nomads on the battlefield.⁴¹³ Although this theory was never tested and remains speculative, the local manufacture of these items is usually accepted.

Another type, however, labelled by Kirpichnikov as 'Local-A', is unequivocally a Rus'ian development. The few handles belonging to this group are among the finest examples of Rus' craftsmanship and are dated to around 1000 CE. Their area of distribution is centred in Rus' (Staraya Ryazan, Kiev, Karabchiv, Purdoski), while the surrounding countries yielded only three specimens: two were found in Sweden (Kalmar, Kungs Husby) and one in Lithuania (Palanga). The composition of the hilts, despite the different contents of the elements, is close in composition to be regarded the product of the same workshops.⁴¹⁴

There is another archaeological theory which finds close links between viking activity in the East and sword production in the Viking world. An extensive metallurgical study by Alan Williams put forward a theory on the origin of Scandinavian sword manufacture. Williams examined 56 Viking Age swords with the inscription ULFBERHT and grouped them into categories based on the slag-carbon content of their blades. He found that the best quality swords with more than 0.8 % carbon and minimal slag were made of hypereutectoid steel, a substance only to be produced in the Viking Age with the crucible method practiced in Central Asia (mainly Persia) and further East in India. Only these swords bear the 'original' spelling of the name ULFBERHT, that is +VLBERH+T, suggesting that any deviating spelling are lower quality copies. Williams suggests that the raw material for the production of these highest quality blades had to come in the form of casted steel ingots from Central Asia and fuelled to the North via the Volga. He also sees a correlation between the cessation of Samanid silver flow and the ULFBERHT swords' production (as crucible steel became unavailable along with silver).⁴¹⁵ William's methodology and results have been contested, and newer studies show that high-quality blades could be manufactured also in Europe.⁴¹⁶ Nevertheless, his study was the first to call attention to the highly varying quality of blades being in circulation at the time, and this points towards the existence of many different workshops. Although he did not elaborate on his assertion

⁴¹³ Stalsberg, "Mønstersmidde sverd og varjagerkontroversen", 23–4; Gleb S. Lebedev, "Etyud o mechakh vikingov", in *Arkheologicheskaya tipologiya*, ed. L. S. Klejn (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1991), 298.

⁴¹⁴ Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzhie*, 35–6; Fedir Androshchuk, "K istorii kontaktov mezhdru Shvetsiyei i Yuzhnoy Rus'yu v XI–XII vekax", in *D'neslovo. Zbirka prats' na poshanu diysnoho chlena Natsional'noyi Akademiyi Nauk Ukrayiny Petra Petrovycha Tolochka z nahody yoho 70-richchya*, ed. G. Yu. Ivakin (Kiev: Korvinpres, 2008), 101–2; Sergei Yu. Kainov and S. A. Stefutin, "Navershiye mecha iz sobraniya Gosudarstvennogo Istoricheskogo Muzeya", in *Obrazy vremeni. Iz istorii drevnego iskusstva*, ed. I. V. Belocerkovskaya (Moscow: Trudy GIM, 2012), 154–62; Alexandr A. Begovatkin, "Drevnerusskiy mech X v. iz okrestnostey sela Purdoshki", *Centr i periferiya* 3 (2012): 40–4.

⁴¹⁵ Williams, *The Sword and the Crucible*, 117–83.

⁴¹⁶ Eva Elisabeth Astrup and Irmelin Martens, "Studies of Viking Age Swords: Metallography and Archaeology", *Gladius* 31 (2011): 203–5; Petri Ingo, "Material and Properties of VLBERHT swords", in *The Sword: Form and Thought. Proceedings of the second Sword Conference 19/20 November 2015 Deutsches Klingmuseum Solingen*, ed. Lisa Deutscher, Mirjam Kaiser and Sixt Wetzler (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), 61–88.

that the production of ULFBERHT blades ceases along with the Samanid silver due to a shortage of raw material, he was roughly right in capturing the coincidence. ULFBERHT blades were not produced after the late tenth century as any eleventh- or twelfth-century swords with this inscription are in fact compounds; tenth-century blades being refurnished with hilts later.⁴¹⁷

To summarize what has been said so far, the written sources paint a pattern that Rus' sword production was on the rise in the last decades of the tenth century. A well-defined system of multiple settlements co-produced blades and handles in the highest quality attracting the attention of far-away buyers even in the heart of Central Asia. Archaeological evidence points to a marked increase in the number of swords in Rus' graves from the second half of the tenth century (exact dating cannot be achieved), whilst signs of unambiguous indigenous sword production appear from the late tenth century. Whether the tenth-century Rus' sword industry involved any eastern technology remains debated. In the last section, I shall consider the circumstances that can help us situate this information in a broader historical perspective.

Final remarks

As a summary for this part the Rus' are seen as traders of what actually might be Frankish swords in the earliest times. Such a trade in Frankish swords probably continued until the end of the ninth century, but in the last decades of the century some Rus' may have bought Islamic blades for themselves. In tandem with the development of sword production in Scandinavia, the Rus' are seen by Islamic writers as possessor of "Frankish swords" in most of the tenth century. This is understandable as Scandinavians copied and even counterfeited such blades making it impossible for outside observers (and probably also to their fellow Scandinavians) to distinguish between the two. In 980s', producing centres were established in the East in Kiev and the surrounding settlements. Although swords were also produced locally earlier in Rus' too, the scale and the technology of this definitely kicked off in the last decades of the tenth century. The Rus' sword industry widely distributed them to the Islamic world. Their renown even lingered into later accounts of educated Islamic writers in the heart of Central Asia.

The 980s coincides with two important historical phenomena in the eastern Viking world. One of them is the cessation of Samanid silver flow, the other is Vladimir's accession to power and unification of the Rus' lands. Since written sources are taciturn for the area at this time, a wider spectrum of analogical events might bear relevance to explain the place of sword trade in the equation.

⁴¹⁷ Petri, "ULFBERHT swords", 2.

From 980s very few Islamic coins reached Scandinavia and Rus' with the last Samanid minted specimen dated to 985/6. A scarce resurgence of coins minted in the successor states of Samanid Persia is datable to the early eleventh century. The gap between 985 and 1000 implies a break in Rus' contacts with Central Asia.⁴¹⁸ Noonan suggested that the Ghaznavid and Qarakhanid take-over disrupted trade with 'Eastern Europe' and the discovery of Central European silver mines might have prompted Rus' traders to turn towards the Baltics and the West with their wares.⁴¹⁹ At the same time, there is a curious clustering of hoards with *termini post quem* in the 980s and 990s in Volga Bulgharia including rare coins of the Khwarazmsahs. That these coins did not reach the Rus' is suggestively explained with the low-quality silver content of late-tenth-century Central Asian coins and/or the displacement of the Rus' in the Central Asian trade networks by the Volga Bulgars.⁴²⁰ All in all, the situation is not adequately understood.

Nevertheless, the numismatic evidence aligns with the rise of the sword trade in the 980s despite the seeming contradictions. First of such is the apparent lack of Central Asian coins from 980s in Rus' in contrast to their accumulation in Volga Bulgharia. The exclusion of the Rus' from the Transoxanian trade system is at odds with the export of Rus' swords towards the East. However, despite the amenity suggested by the numismatic data as well as some of the written sources pertaining to the 980s,⁴²¹ trade between the Rus' and the Volga Bulgars must not have ceased in the 980s. Such is indicated by, for instance Vladimir's eventual peace-making with the Bulgars after his victorious campaign in 985, and the words of the *Hudūd* that in spite of their wars with the Rus', the Bulgars carry on commerce with all their neighbours.⁴²² The apparently Rus' imports, among them swords, flowing through Bulgharia to Khwarazm in c. 985 recorded by Muqaddasī should also be added to the list. The only possibility to explain this discrepancy is that the Rus' received something else other than coins in payment from the Bulgars. In addition, based on coins of the Uqaylid and Marwanid emirates of Upper Mesopotamia and Asia Minor found in Rus', an alternative Rus' attempt to establish trade links with the Caspian Basin is also registered.⁴²³ That no Ghaznavid coins have been

⁴¹⁸ Marek Jankowiak, "Dirham flows into northern and eastern Europe and the rhythms of the slave trade with the Islamic world", in *Viking-Age Trade: Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, eds. Jacek Gruszczyński, Marek Jankowiak and Jonathan Shepard, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, No. 3. (London: Routledge, 2020), 124; cf. Thomas S. Noonan, "Fluctuations in Islamic Trade with Eastern Europe during the Viking Age", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 16, no. 3–4 (1992): 248, 254–9.

⁴¹⁹ Noonan, "Fluctuations in Islamic Trade with Eastern Europe", 252.

⁴²⁰ Jankowiak, "Dirham flows into northern and eastern Europe", 124; Roman K. Kovalev, "O roli Rusov i Volzhskikh Bulgar v importe severoiranskikh dirhemov v Evropu vo vtoroi polovine X – nachale XI v.", *Drevneishie gosudarstva na territorii SSSR/Vostochnoi Evropy* (2015): 95–143.

⁴²¹ PVL 39; Bosworth, *Hudūd al-ʿĀlam*, 160; Kovalev, "O roli Rusov i Volzhskikh Bulgar".

⁴²² See the previous note.

⁴²³ Viacheslav S. Kuleshov, "Coin circulation in early Rus and the dynamics of Rus družinas", in *Viking-Age Trade: Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, eds. Jacek Gruszczyński, Marek Jankowiak and Jonathan Shepard, Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World, No. 3. (London: Routledge, 2020), 167.

found so far in Rus' territory,⁴²⁴ seemingly also contrasts with a direct Ghaznavid interest in Rus' swords. However, it is perhaps not random that after subduing the Ziyarid regime of Tabaristan and Gurgan and making them Ghaznavid vassals in 1011/2,⁴²⁵ Mahmud's court historians start reporting about the Rus' in the exact same territory. Ziyarid coins in fact do appear in Rus' territory.⁴²⁶ Thus, in light of the numismatic and written data it is not unreasonable that the Rus' tried to sold their merchandise – among them double-edged swords – through multiple channels and several modes of exchange.

These turbulent times also witnessed the process of early state formation in Rus' under the *aegis* of Vladimir. In tandem with analogous phenomena in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, rulers extracted resources of their land under larger control in order to maximalise revenues. The central control of trade and production is witnessed in the description of the Rus' towns in the *Hudūd*: there is a division of labour with specialized workshops (and probably also resources) between the settlements concentrating all finished products in the centre of the 'state', Kiev. Although it is not easy to substantiate with much evidence, there is a chance that with the push-back of a former livelihood based partly on raids and slave-trafficking, new forms of incomes had to be sought within Rus' society. The ambivalence of this can be perhaps grasped in the words of Rus' envoys dispatched to the court of the Khwarazmshah and complaining about the missing raids as recorded by Marvazī and treated above. The *Hudūd* also paints a more centralized society of the Rus' in the 980s than the Jayhānī tradition from which it borrowed the passage originally. The apparent lack of predatory raids on the Saqāliba, who instead now have a group integrated in servile status within the Rus' elite also bespeaks of changing circumstances. It also highlights their central governmental features; a sole ruler and a religious caste, as well as regularized tithes and commerce. According to the PVL, before his conversion, Vladimir personally owned 800 slave women housed in three different settlements.⁴²⁷ Such a high-volume slave trade is unheard of after his conversion and the two things might be connected.

The sword trade could partly replace some of the lost income resulting from the drying of Samanid silver and slave trade. The volume of the slave and sword trade is not possible to compare both on the grounds of very meagre data on slave- and virtually none on swords prices as well as on the subjectivity of the matter: the prices for individual slaves and swords could vary so greatly that some of them costed a fortune.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁴ Kuleshov, "Coin circulation in early Rus", 160–4.

⁴²⁵ Bosworth, "The early Ghaznavids", 175.

⁴²⁶ Kuleshov, "Coin circulation in early Rus", 164, Table 8.6.

⁴²⁷ PVL 38–9.

⁴²⁸ On slave prices, see: Romney David Smith, "The business of human trafficking: slaves and money between Western Italy and the House of Islam before the Crusades (c.900–c.1100)", *Journal of Medieval History* 45, no. 5 (2019): 546–

Apart from trade, larger-scale sword production was in the interest of emerging states for military purposes also. Unifying large territories required the maintenance of larger fighting units. Early medieval retinues bound to a ruler operated within a gift-giving economy in which bestowing precious items, among them weapons by rulers to retainers was the driving incitement for loyal service. What mattered in these symbolic gift exchanges was the value and the social capital acquired through the ‘biography’ of the given object. It does not seem to be a requirement on part of the chiefs (or rulers) to equip retainers with armament on his own expense. Followers owned their weaponry and entered service with their personal equipment. Being rewarded with costly, often parade-weapons was an extra benefit of serving in a prestigious ruler’s retinue, however, this honour was probably not granted to all members.

By the late tenth century this has probably somewhat changed. Many warriors probably still possessed their own weaponry which especially applied to mercenaries seeking fortune abroad. Icelandic sagas often report that individuals owned more than one sword and shields sometimes,⁴²⁹ and it is intriguing that we are talking about Icelanders generally considered to be poorer than warrior elites in mainland Scandinavia. The reason for having a substitute sword varied. We would expect practical reasons to play a part in this, but in many of the accounts, decisions are governed by supernatural beliefs, such as defeating a *berserkr* with an unseen sword or neglecting a good quality blade due to a curse. Although the sagas are not always to be trusted, it is not unreasonable to suppose that wealthier people owned more than one sword also in the Viking Age.

However, there are indications that equipping (at least their closest) warriors became a necessity for rulers around the millennium. One is reminded of Óláfr Tryggvason’s final sea battle at Svöldr where he had to distribute swords from his personal chest on board to substitute for the blunted blades of his warriors.⁴³⁰ According to Ibrāhīm ibn Ya’qūb, the Polish ruler Mieszko I (960–92) had to equip his 3000 warriors with clothes, horses and weapons.⁴³¹ Vladimir’s obligation to provide silver tableware for all his followers during a banquet also rather bespeaks of the uniformity of rulers’ duties than of individual rewards of precious gifts to exceptional followers.⁴³² The *Lex Castrensis* (or *Vederlov*) probably issued by King Knútr in the early eleventh century states that on account of the multitude of warriors flogging under his banner, the king issued a provision that only warriors with

52. I have found some that are not included in Smith’s list but bears a direct relevance to the Rus’: Rus’ and Byzantine prisoners and slaves shall be ransomed for fixed prices from 5–20 bezants, recorded differently in the peace treaties of 912 and 945. PVL 19, 25. Miskawayh reports that the Rus’ ransomed captives for a price of 20 dirhems each during the siege of Bardha’ah. Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 63–4.

⁴²⁹ Davidson, *The sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, 165, 176, 205, 209.

⁴³⁰ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*, Vol. 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenkz Fornrit, no. 28, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 363.

⁴³¹ *Kitāb al-Masālik wa al-mamālik Abū ‘Ubayd al-Bakrī*, ed. Adrian P. van Leeuwen and André Ferre (Tunis: al-Dār al-‘Arabīyah lil-Kitāb, 1992), 333.

⁴³² PVL 56.

their own weaponry will be admitted to his retinue.⁴³³ The king was apparently unable to provide every man with axes and swords (the standard weapons judging by the law) as has been the custom previously. The institution of *heriot* in Late Anglo-Saxon England required weaponry – especially swords – of retainers, on account of their death, to be returned to the king, whilst surviving kingly wills make it clear that the king's armoury – again swords are most frequently mentioned – were to be inherited within the royal family.⁴³⁴ These isolated examples cover a large geographical span within the boundaries of the Viking world, but they all roughly concern the same period. All testify that rulers eager for uniting and controlling larger parts of their kingdoms faced the same situation: they had to possess an armoury from which followers could be outfitted.

Archaeological evidence also indicates that there was a standardization of weaponry under way in Late Viking Age Scandinavia. It is shown for instance by surviving specimen of bulk-produced weapons, for instance axes found in bunds of dozens.⁴³⁵ Alongside this, in the early Viking Age weaponry was highly individualized (especially in decorative elements, such as inscriptions, inlays, pattern welding, sword chapes), whilst by the end of the period sword hilts become more devoid of individual features and weapon types (e.g. sword hilts and blades) become more standardized.⁴³⁶ Practicality now mattered more than parade. Also, weapon graves in Denmark show a widespread standardization of equestrian equipment paired usually with a sword and a spear (and very few axes!). These are signs of an emerging landholding 'nobility' versed in cavalry warfare on Frankish and Ottonian patterns.⁴³⁷ These examples are in contrast to the early Viking Age, where rulers gifted warriors with costly weaponry for their individual deeds as read for instance in the ninth-century skaldic poem, *Haraldskvæði*.⁴³⁸ Warriors became soldiers during state formation processes of the Viking Age.⁴³⁹ An increased, centralized production of weaponry was therefore on the agenda for any ruler. In Birka's garrison, dated to the second half of the tenth century, the floor layers of the central hall produced numerous fragments of weaponry – sword pommels, spearheads, arrowheads, shield bosses as well as mail consisting of chains and plates of lamellae armour. The remarkably large quantity of padlocks and keys found therein suggest the presence of coffer and chests used to store

⁴³³ "The Law of the Retainers or of the Court", in *The Works of Sven Aggesen twelfth-century Danish historian*, trans. Eric Christiansen (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992), 32–3.

⁴³⁴ Heinrich Härke, "The circulation of weapons in Anglo-Saxon society", in *Rituals of Power. From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Frans Theuvs and Janet L. Nelson (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 382–6.

⁴³⁵ E.g. Henriette Lyngstrøm, "Twelve axes on a stick", in *From Viking to Crusader. The Scandinavians and Europe 800–1200*, eds. Else Roesdahl and David M. Wilson (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 250, Cat. no. 93.

⁴³⁶ Williams, "Warfare & Military Expansion", 106–10.

⁴³⁷ Anne Pedersen, "Weapons and riding gear in burials – evidence of military and social rank in 10th century Denmark?" in *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European perspective, AD 1–1300*, ed. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen and Birthe L. Clausen, PNM, no. 2 (Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark, 1997), 123–35.

⁴³⁸ Robert D. Fulka (trans.), "Þorbjörn hornklofi, Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)", in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. Diana Whaley, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, no. 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 91, Stanza 19.

⁴³⁹ Williams, "Warfare & Military Expansion", 106–15.

equipment. Spears and shields were also placed alongside the walls or were hanging from them. The hall building joined a smithy containing four forges, where at least eight smiths could have been active with the production of said items, among them the c. 400 (!) knives found in the eastern end of the hall building.⁴⁴⁰

All these indicate that Vladimir's own military following was probably in need of swords in larger numbers too. Apart from Islamic clients, the state formation processes in Scandinavia could also provide new potential buyers for the Kievan sword industry. Individuals aspiring for more than one piece or rulers looking for good quality blades to keep their retinues constantly equipped might have been interested in Rus' swords.

⁴⁴⁰ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and Lena Holmquist Olausson, *The Oriental Mounts from Birka's Garrison. An Expression of Warrior Rank and Status*, Antikvarist arkiv, no. 81 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2006), 10–2.

Chapter 4

Retainers

At some time c. 960–70 or slightly later, a powerful Rus' ruler, probably of princely status, died, was cremated and buried in the Rus' town of Chernigov (now in Ukraine), widely known today as the 'Black Grave', first excavated in the early 1870s.⁴⁴¹ The body rested under a monumental ten-metre-high kurgan together with other bodies, maybe his son and accompanying slaves, although there are debates on the exact number, sex and age of the buried individuals.⁴⁴² The burial became famous for its size and for the opulent grave goods from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Two Byzantine gold coins, of Constantine Porphyrogenitus and Romanos II (959–63), were thought to date the burial safely to the second part of the tenth century, but new investigations based on artefact typology and C14 examination do not exclude a later date at the turn of the tenth century (980–1025).⁴⁴³ The contents of the burial were gifted to various museum collections shortly after its discovery, but a recent re-examination of some of the objects in the grave has led to new interpretations.

The Chernigov burial likely included a boat indicated by surviving rivet mounts only discovered in 1996, which was characteristic for Scandinavian burials.⁴⁴⁴ Bones of horses and rams were also recovered, probably sacrificed during the funeral feast. The weapons' complex found in the grave, however, is the most intriguing (*Fig. 1.*). Remnants of mails and two typical viking swords in a contemporary Nordic style amply testify that either the deceased or those burying him were well acquainted with close combat. Two spearheads and several arrowheads were found, too, weapons that were part of traditional Scandinavian weaponry in the period, although some of them were also standard elements of other cultures' arms. That some of the deceased were probably a mounted warriors is indicated by two pairs of surviving stirrups in the grave. The steppe environment is also clearly referenced among the Rus' mourners by two nomad-type sabres best suited for mounted warfare. A conical helmet found in the grave was described as being of Khazar type. In addition, the steppe motifs on the silver plates on two Nordic drinking horns in the grave show the fusion of Scandinavian and steppe ideas and were probably crafted in Rus' (*Fig. 2.*). Another product of Rus' workshops, a small statuette, usually believed to be of the Norse god Þórr, was also found in the Black

⁴⁴¹ Mel'nikova, "Retinue culture and retinue state", 70–1; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 239–41.

⁴⁴² Oleh Vasyuta, "Kurhan Chorna Mohyla v istorichnykh doslidzhenniyakh mynuloho ta suchasnosti." *Siveryans'kyy litopys* 132, no. 6 (2016): 3–18.

⁴⁴³ V. G. Lushin, "K voprosu o date Chornoy Mogily", in *Istoriya Arkheologiya Kul'tura. Materialy i issledovaniya*, ed. M. G. Moiseyenko and Ye. P. Tokareva (Zimovniki: Zimovnikovskiy krayevedcheskiy muzey, 2019), 21–33; V. V. Murasheva, S. Yu. Kainov, E. S. Kovalenko, K. M. Podurets, V. P. Glazkov, M. M. Murashev, I. A. Chichayev, N. N. Presniakova, E. Yu. Tereschenko, V. M. Retivov and E. B. Yatsishina, "'Barbarian Scepters' of the Viking Age from Chernaya Mogila burial mound at Chernigov (present-day Ukraine)", *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 37 (2021): 102946.

⁴⁴⁴ Neil Price, "Dying and the dead. Viking Age mortuary behaviour", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 264–6.

Grave. Invisible details of the figure discovered during restoration cleaning indicated that the figure sits in a lotus position known from Central Asian (among others Sogdian) artwork and wears a caftan worn by people in the Caucasus and the steppes (*Fig. 3.*). The statuette was most likely manufactured by a Scandinavian craftsman on Iranian and steppe models.⁴⁴⁵ Thus, the grave reflected the material culture of a warrior elite closely connected to both distant and neighbouring networks of trade and culture, including Scandinavia, Byzantium and the steppes.

The curious mix of foreign influence on the Rus' warrior elite partly came through military channels. From the ninth to mid-eleventh centuries, Scandinavian warrior groups were sought after as retainers and mercenaries in several areas along the *austurvegr*. Called Rus' or later Varangians, they were present in various courts of the region, such as Kiev and other Rus' courts, Constantinople, as well as Itil, the capital of the Khazar Khaganate, and even Georgia and the Islamic Derbent. Their entry into local service has also been raised for several other areas, including Volga Bulgharia, Hungary, Poland and Bohemia – and in most cases this seems plausible (see *Map. 1.*).⁴⁴⁶ Retinues and armies in the various locales functioned differently, and Scandinavians and Rus' served together with warriors of different ethnic backgrounds. As I will propose, the experience of migrating warriors between various courts of the region inflicted variegated influence on them in a military-cultural sense. Such experience fuelled back into the Rus' territories and eastern Scandinavia not only through migrating Scandinavian but also Turkic retinue members; as seen in the example of the Black Grave, reflections of close co-operation is visible in the material culture of the Rus' warrior elite. Written and archaeological evidence from the better documented locales suggest that Turkic impact was especially decisive, resulting not only in adopted military attire and fighting habits, but also in a lifestyle and customs associated with the prestige of mounted steppe elites.

Instead of an in-depth analysis of the Scandinavians' presence in the courts mentioned (which have extensive literature in the case of the Kievan *druzhina* and the Byzantine Varangian Guard), the sub-chapters illustrate two issues through selective evidence; on the one hand they briefly set up the chronological boundaries of Scandinavian and Rus' presence in the various courts and illustrate the local cultural influence on them, on the other hand, demonstrate the mutual presence of steppe

⁴⁴⁵ V. V. Murasheva, O. V. Orfinskaya and A. Yu. Loboda, “‘Novaya istoriya’ ‘idola’ iz kurgana Chernaya mogila (X. v.)”, *Rossiyskaya Arkheologiya* no. 1 (2019): 73–86; Veronika Murasheva and Olga Ofirinskaya, “Tenth-century “idol” from Chorna Mohyla”, in *A Viking Century. Chernihiv Area from 900 to 1000 AD*, ed. Stepan Stepanenko (Paris: ACHCByz, 2022), 137–51. As far as I am aware, no Scandinavian influence is detectable on ‘oriental’ artefacts in the Caucasus giving no ground to surmise the identity of the artist of being of Eastern origin, who incorporated Nordic ornamentation.

⁴⁴⁶ Throughout the chapter the centres of these territories are referred to as ‘courts’, although great differences must have existed among them. Thus, ‘court’ as a general term denotes the residence (whether itinerant or not) of a given ruler and his entourage.

warriors alongside the Northerners in many of these power centres and propose a similar military-cultural impact.

Military service in the Kievan Rus'

The Scandinavians arrived in the Middle Dnieper area after occupying Kiev. According to the semi-legendary tradition preserved in the PVL, this occurred in the middle of the ninth century.⁴⁴⁷ Archaeological evidence in the Rus' "capital", however, suggests that the Scandinavian presence only became decisive there during the late tenth century.⁴⁴⁸ Regardless of the precise date, in Kiev the Scandinavians probably made up a large part of the retinue called a *druzhina*, taking possession of the town as an aggressive military unit. The term *druzhina*, which derived from the Russian word *drug* ('friend'), was used to denote the armed retinue of princes living in the territories of the Kievan Rus' and other Slavic polities of Eastern Europe.⁴⁴⁹ The *druzhinas* contributed decisively to the emergence and operation of the Kievan Rus' state itself as best envisaged in the PVL's and Constantine's description of the *poliudia* discussed previously. Even though local warriors were employed, Rus' warbands in the period included (if they were not mostly composed of) Scandinavians who arrived in the East with their own ships, crews and weapons in search of plunder and glory. This is inferred from later copyists of the Jayhānī tradition, who clearly distinguish the Rus' from the Slavs, whom they ruled over and raided.⁴⁵⁰ Later evidence, such as runestone inscriptions and sagas such as *Eymundar þáttir Hringssonar* and *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, also support this in relation to the arrival of Scandinavian mercenaries to Rus'.⁴⁵¹ For these later Rus' princes such as Vladimir and Yaroslav, the logic of hiring ethnically distinct retinue members rested on two basic principles. Mercenaries coming from abroad to tribal societies were not linked to any kin group, thus rulers did not have to be afraid that their own men would betray them or refrain from taking action due to ties of blood with a local family.⁴⁵² Foreign retainers enhanced the court's prestige by displaying their

⁴⁴⁷ PVL 14.

⁴⁴⁸ Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus'*, 98–109; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 220, 257; Androshchuk, *Vikings in the East*, 31–2, 216–7.

⁴⁴⁹ Uwe Halbach, *Der Russische Fürstenhof vor dem 16. Jahrhundert: eine vergleichende Untersuchung zur politischen Lexikologie und Verfassungsgeschichte der alten Rus'* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985), 94–110; Mel'nikova, "Retinue culture and retinue state"; Petr C. Stefanovich, *Boyare, otroki, družiny. Voenno-politicheskaya elita rusi v X–XI vekakh* (Moscow: Indrik, 2012).

⁴⁵⁰ BGA I–7, 145–7; Martinez, "Gardīzī's two chapters", 166–8; Göckenjan and Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte*, 234.

⁴⁵¹ *Eymundar þáttir Hringssonar*, in *Flateyjarbok. En samling af norske kongesagaer*. Vol. 2, eds. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Carl Rikard Unger (Christiania: P. T. Mallings, 1862), 120; Friedrich Braun, "Das historische Russland im nordischen Schrifttum des 10. bis 14. Jahrhunderts", in *Festschrift für Eugen Mogk zum 70. Geburtstag 19 Juli 1924* (Halle and der Saale: Verlag von Max Niemeyer, 1924), 164–5; *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, in Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*, Vol. 3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit, no. 28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 69–70.

⁴⁵² Márta Font, "Druzhina", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Warfare and Military Technology: Mercenaries - Zürich, Siege of: 596 S.*, ed. Clifford J. Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 549–50.

traditional warrior gear, often together with a distinctive body-build and special martial skills. Such general features of retinues were noted in earlier centuries by the Roman historian Tacitus.⁴⁵³

During the ninth and tenth centuries, however, settling Scandinavians merged with the Slavs, which is usually evidenced by the gradual appearance of Slavic names among the Rus' elite contracting treaties with the Byzantines.⁴⁵⁴ Ethnicities merged greatly during the tenth century. Scandinavian loanwords in Old Slavonic, and Old Slavonic terms in the Old Norse language both appear.⁴⁵⁵ Scandinavian loanwords in the East Slavic language are ethnic, place and personal names, or terms mostly connected to commercial or political activities (e.g. *væringr* 'Varangian', *griði* 'retinue', *akkeri* 'anchor', *pund* 'pound'). Nearly the same can be said about Old Norse lexical borrowings from East Slavic (e.g. *safali* 'sable', *torg* 'market', *polota* 'palace', *Girkir* 'Greeks') pointing out socio-economic activities that tied together Old Norse speakers with the inhabitants of Eastern Europe.⁴⁵⁶ In addition to mutual borrowings, Scandinavians not only acquired the local language but adopted the Slavic script as well. In the Saint Sophia Cathedral of Kiev, the Norse name *Yakun* (Hákon) appears written with Cyrillic letters.⁴⁵⁷ This phenomenon is also confirmed by two graffiti on the walls of the Saint Sophia Cathedral of Novgorod dating from the second half of the eleventh century and 1137. Birch bark letters from the Ladoga region dated to the same period also contain Old Norse names in Cyrillic letters. In a famous tenth-century boat grave of Gnezdovo, hiding a high-status Rus warrior, the first Slavic language relic – an amphora with the inscription *gorouhsha* – has been found.⁴⁵⁸ Thus, besides preserving Old Norse, it is safe to assume that many Scandinavians living among the Slavs became bilingual by the tenth century.

Vladimir supposedly set up pagan idols of different kinds on the Kievan castle hill to create a common identity among his ethnically mixed retinue.⁴⁵⁹ Such a cultural merge is perhaps discernible in the PVL when the Rus' entered into a contract and took oaths upon their weapons, a well-known

⁴⁵³ Tacitus, *Dialogus, Agricola, Germania*, eds. T. E. Page and W. H. D. Rouse (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 282.

⁴⁵⁴ Alexander Sitzmann, *Nordgermanisch-ostslavische Sprachkontakte in der Kiever Rus' bis zum Tode Jaroslavs des Weisen* (Vienna: Praesens Verlag, 2003), 58–69; Elena Mel'nikova, "The List of Old Norse Personal Names in the Russian–Byzantine Treaties of the tenth century", *Studia anthropomynica scandinavica: Tidskrift för nordisk personnamnsforskning* (2004): 5–27.

⁴⁵⁵ Gunnar Svane, "Vikingetidens nordiske låneord i russisk", in *Ottende tværfaglige vikingesymposium*, ed. Thorben Kisbye and Else Roesdahl (Aarhus: Hiruni, 1989) 18–32; Clara Thörnqvist, *Studien über die nordischen Lehnwörter im Russischen* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1948).

⁴⁵⁶ Bohdan Struminski, *Linguistic Interrelations in Early Rus': Northmen, Finns and East Slavs (Ninth to Eleventh Centuries)* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1996), 229–54.

⁴⁵⁷ Androshchuk, "The Vikings in the East", 535.

⁴⁵⁸ Elena Mel'nikova, "The Cultural Assimilation of Varangians in Eastern Europe from the Point of View of Language and Literacy", in *Runica – Germanica – Mediaevalia*, Vol. 37., ed. Wilhelm Heizmann and Astrid van Nahl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 456.

⁴⁵⁹ George Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 123; Márta Font, "A magyar kalandozások és a kelet-európai viking terjeszkedés", in *Állam, hatalom, ideológia. Tanulmányok az orosz történelem sajátosságairól*, eds. Márta Font and Endre Sashalmi (Budapest: Pannonica, 2007), 44.

Scandinavian tradition,⁴⁶⁰ although at the same time they apparently pledged allegiance to Slavic gods – Perun and Volos.⁴⁶¹ This is also visible in the archaeological evidence. The Baltic, Finnic and Slavic tribes of the forest belt shared their world with the Scandinavians, sometimes being the victims, but on the long run as actors who successfully became adopted to the Scandinavian elite and finally transformed it to their own likeness. Chamber-graves, kurgans and conic mounds called *sopki* (prevalent in Northern Russia) are power expressions of an ethnically mixed elite, in which Scandinavian cultural elements not only spread by personal Scandinavian involvement but also as cultural tokens of belonging to the group.⁴⁶²

Later, *druzhinas* incorporated not only Scandinavians and Slavs but also men from the steppes. This phenomenon probably started with the Rus' and nomads conducting joint campaigns. Magyar and Pecheneg warriors took part in Rus' campaigns led by Kiev during the tenth century. In 944 *knyaz* Igor advanced against the Greeks after assembling warriors from a wide array of tribes, including, according to the text, “‘Varangians’, Rus’ and Pechenegs”.⁴⁶³ Similarly, the battle of Arcadiopolis (970) was fought between the Byzantines and an alliance of Rus', Magyars, Pechenegs and Bulgars.⁴⁶⁴ Scandinavians and steppe-nomads learned tactics from each other during common campaigns; the result may have been the introduction of horses into Scandinavian Rus' warfare techniques,⁴⁶⁵ commonly exemplified in the words of the Byzantine chronicler Leo Diaconus, who highlighted that the Rus' cavalry that advanced against the Byzantines in 971 at the battle of Dorostolon was inexperienced because they were not trained for mounted warfare.⁴⁶⁶ Some of Prince Sviatoslav's retinue members, however, were already experienced horsemen, according to the descriptions in the PVL and Leo Diaconus's work.⁴⁶⁷ At the same time, however, some warriors of the prince still carried arms more typical of Scandinavian vikings than nomads, namely, mail, shield and double-edged sword. The Rus' commander, Pretich, gifted these weapons to the Pechenegs during a peace treaty negotiation, and they offered him their own distinctive weapons: spear, sabre and

⁴⁶⁰ Martina Stein-Wilkshuis, “Scandinavians swearing oaths in tenth-century Russia: Pagans and Christians”, *Journal of Medieval History* 28 (2002): 155–68.

⁴⁶¹ PVL 17, 26.

⁴⁶² Johan Callmer, “Herrschaftsbildung und Machtausübung: Die Anfänge der ar-Rus (Rus') ca. 500–1000 n. Chr.”, in *Bereit zum Konflikt. Strategien und Medien der Konflikterzeugung*, ed. Oliver Auge, Felix Biermann, Matthias Müller and Dirk Schultze (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2008), 123; Kirill A. Mikhajlov, “Chamber-graves as international phenomenon of the Viking Age: from Denmark to Old Rus'”, in *Wolińskie Spotkania Mediewistyczne I. Ekskluzywne życie – dostojny pochówek w kręgu kultury elitarnej wieków średnich*, ed. Mariana Rebkowski (Wolin: MKiDN, 2011), 205–21; Nadezhda I. Platonova, “Elite culture of Old Rus': New Publications and Discussions (A Review of IHMC Ras Studies in 2015–2016)”, *Archaeologica Baltica* 24 (2017): 123–30.

⁴⁶³ RPC 72; original: PVL 23.

⁴⁶⁴ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 108; Georgius Cedrenus, Vol. 2, ed. Immanuel Bekker, CSBH, no. 2. Bonn: Weber, 1839), 288–91.

⁴⁶⁵ Androshchuk, *Vikings in the East*, 222–3.

⁴⁶⁶ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 134.

⁴⁶⁷ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 156–7; PVL 31.

arrows.⁴⁶⁸ The participation of Rus' merchants in contemporary arms dealing also shows that the Rus' wielded straight double-edged swords,⁴⁶⁹ and Leo Diaconus describes their tactics as analogous to the viking shield wall.⁴⁷⁰ He also reports that during the battle in front of the city of Dorostolon certain Rus' warriors behaved like mad animals and gave out savage roars.⁴⁷¹ Combat ecstasy like this is mostly known from the Scandinavian pagan tradition of the berserks, who allegedly acted like mad bears and wolves during battles.⁴⁷² Although this passage might be a Byzantine topos to illustrate the barbarity of their enemies,⁴⁷³ the description is quite specific. Scandinavians still held high-status offices in the Rus' military at the time, such as Sveinald (ON. Sveinaldr), the deputy commander of the prince, and Asmund (ON. Ásmundr), Sviatoslav's personal preceptor.⁴⁷⁴

According to the PVL, not only did Sviatoslav ally himself with people from the steppes, but he himself lived his life in the saddle and was always prepared for war like a typical nomad:

“Stepping light as a leopard, he undertook many campaigns. Upon his expeditions he carried with him neither wagons nor kettles, and boiled no meat, but cut off small strips of horseflesh, game, or beef, and ate it after roasting it on the coals. Nor did he have a tent, but he spread out a horse-blanket under him, and set his saddle under his head.”⁴⁷⁵

Sviatoslav's (nomadic) appearance in the PVL is backed up by Leo Diaconus's description of the Rus' *knyaz*, as will be shown later. The retinues of Sviatoslav and the later Rus' princes were unique, culturally distinct fighting corps that amalgamated steppe and traditionally Scandinavian warfare tactics and weaponry.

⁴⁶⁸ PVL 32.

⁴⁶⁹ Polgár, “Kora középkori (9–12. századi)”.

⁴⁷⁰ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 133.

⁴⁷¹ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 133.

⁴⁷² Berserkers (*berserkir* in Old Norse) appear in Old Norse literature as champions fighting in a state of ecstasy, howling like mad bears and wolves before battle, snarling and chewing the edge of their own shields. There is still a debate in academic literature about the perception of berserkers, which I will not discuss in detail here. The ecstatic state in battle has been attributed by researchers among others to toxic mushrooms; Howard D. Fabing, “On going berserk: A neurochemical inquiry”, *Scientific Monthly* 83 no. 5 (1956): 409–15; the ritual worship of the Viking god Odin; Jens Peter Schjødt, “The Notion of Berserkir and the Relation between Ódinn and Animal Warriors”, in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature. Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference. Durham and York 6th–12th August, 2006. I–II*, eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, Donata Kick (Durham: Brepols, 2006), 886–92; and literary topos: Anatoly Liberman, “Berserkir A Double Legend”, *Brathair* 4, no. 2 (2004): 97–101; In general, see Benjamin Blaney, “Berserkir”, in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, eds. Phillip Pulsiano, Kirsten Wolf (London: Routledge, 1993), 37–38.

⁴⁷³ S. A. Ivanov, “Bolgari i russkiye v izobrazhenii L'va Diakona”, in *Formirovaniye rannefeodal'nykh slavyanskikh narodnostey*, eds. V. D. Korolyuk, V. V. Ivanov, G. G. Litavrin, N. I. Tolstoy, B. N. Florya and L. V. Zaborovskiy (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 203–15.

⁴⁷⁴ PVL 26–7, 34–5; Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan (eds. and trans.), *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies, no. 41 (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2005), 181, n. 38.

⁴⁷⁵ RPC 84; original: PVL 31.

That steppe people also occasionally benefited from Scandinavian warfare tactics might be supported with the individual case of a retainer in the service of the Rus' prince Yaropolk I (972–8). This retainer, apparently also the prince's counsellor, was called Varayazhko, that is, 'Varangian'. After Yaropolk's death and defeat by Vladimir, Varayazhko defected to the Pechenegs "in whose company he fought long against Vladimir till the latter won him over only with difficulty by means of a sworn pledge".⁴⁷⁶

Although accounts are taciturn on how such campaigns were conducted, other common joint operations of Rus' and steppe people are known. Such examples include Sviatoslav's alliance with the Oghuz' in 965,⁴⁷⁷ and Vladimir's in 985. According to the PVL:

"Accompanied by his uncle, Dobrynya, Vladimir set out by boat to attack the Bulgars. He also brought Torks overland on horseback, and conquered the Bulgars. Dobrynya remarked to Vladimir: 'I have seen the prisoners, who all wear boots. They will not pay us tribute. Let us rather look for foes with bast shoes.' So Vladimir made peace with the Bulgars, and they confirmed it by oath."⁴⁷⁸

It is not said explicitly in the text which Bulgharia was the target of the expedition, but the presence of the Torks makes it more than likely that it was Volga Bulgharia. The designation 'Tork' refers to the Oghuz' in Russian sources, who pastured around Alania and Khazaria at this time,⁴⁷⁹ and could have hardly escorted the Rus' anywhere else than along the River Volga. The joint Rus' and Alan attack on Sharvan and Derbent in 1033 can also be mentioned.⁴⁸⁰

The Scandinavian (Rus' and later Varangian) military service in the Kyvian Rus' involved traditional retinue service, administrative tax-farming (*poliudia*) and later mercenary service as well. Interaction with various ethnic groups such as the Slavs and steppe nomads is detectable during common service in the court and during campaigns as well.

Archaeological data connected to Rus' *druzhinas* is abundant. In the cemeteries of Rus' settlements, assemblages often labelled 'druzhina-graves' have been discovered that frequently contain grave goods of steppe origin, such as belts, mount fittings, sabres, axes, bows, plumed helmets and bone carvings.⁴⁸¹ These objects not only reached the regions adjacent to the steppe, such as

⁴⁷⁶ RPC 93; original: PVL 37.

⁴⁷⁷ Peter B. Golden, "The Migrations of the Oğuz", *Archivum Ottomanicum* 4 (1972): 80; Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus'*, 145; BGA II–1, 282

⁴⁷⁸ RPC 96; original: PVL 39.

⁴⁷⁹ DAI 62–3; see also: István Vásáry, *Geschichte des frühen Innerasiens*, *Studia Turcica*, no. 1 (Herne: Tibor Schäfer, 1993), 170.

⁴⁸⁰ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, (Arabic) 21.

⁴⁸¹ Kirpichnikov, "Connections between Russia and Scandinavia", 73–6; Fodor, "On the Contacts of Hungarians with the

Chernigov, Shestovitsa and Kiev,⁴⁸² but also more northerly areas, such as Izborsk and Timerovo.⁴⁸³ Changes in weapons and military style that occurred in the second part of the tenth century are seen in these graves and affirm the picture in the written evidence from Sviatoslav onwards. Numerous graves and kurgans with military equipment have been discovered in the core areas linked to Kiev through the river tributary to the Dnieper. An examination of 220 burials showed that half of them contained lances, arrows and bow quivers, far more than the number of double-edged swords and even axes, of which 60 were found. Riding gear was also found in 60 of these graves, and a few sabres, a close-combat slashing weapon associated with horsemen, however, only once was a sabre paired with a sword.⁴⁸⁴ Hundreds of steppe belt mounts and horse harness fittings found in Gnezdovo also illustrate the spread of cavalry among the Rus' military elites. Most of the harness fittings were manufactured by the lost wax method, known to be practiced by the Volga Bulgars.⁴⁸⁵

The question is, how was this material connected to the ethnic make-up of retinue culture? That traditional steppe armament in Rus' territories should be regarded as the equipment of Khazar, Pecheneg, Volga Bulgar, Magyar or other steppe warriors in Rus' princely service is the first option. No find complexes are known in which these are the only dominant elements, which either suggests that steppe military influence spread due to individual choices rather than whole fighting units or that steppe warriors soon became acclimated to Rus' communities. Another interpretation of this material is that it was the remnants of a warrior culture where retinue members could acquire distinctive weapons of other cultures regardless of their own 'original' ethnic ancestry. The deceased man in the

Baltic area", 219–20; Bálint Csanád, *Archäologie der Steppe. Steppenvölker zwischen Volga und Donau vom 6. bis zum 10. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1989), 113–6; Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus'*, 123–4; Fedir Androshchuk, "Černigov et Šestovica, Birka et Hovgård: le modèle urbain scandinave vu de l'est", in *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, eds. Michel Kazanski, Anne Nercessian and Constantin Zuckerman (Paris: Éditions P. Lethielleux, 2000), 263; Androshchuk, *Vikings in the East*, 64; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 248; Murasheva, "Kompositgürtel altrussischer Krieger"; Ivan Movchan, "A 10th-century Warrior's Grave from Kiev", in *Kiev – Cherson – Constantinople. Ukrainian Papers at the XXth International Congress of Byzantine Studies (Paris, 19–25 August 2001)*, eds. Alexander Abiabin and Hlib Ivakin (Kiev: Ukrainian National Committee for Byzantine Studies, 2007), 221–3; Tamara Pushkina, "Khazarian souvenirs", in *Cultural interaction between East and West. Archaeology, artefacts and human contacts in northern Europe*, eds. Ulf Fransson, Marie Svedin, Sophie Bergerbrant and Fedir Androshchuk (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007), 149–51.

⁴⁸² Oleksiy Komar, "Černigov und das Gebiet der unteren Desna", in *Die Rus' im 9.–10. Jahrhundert. Ein archäologisches Panorama*. Edited by Nikolaj A. Makarov, Studien zur Siedlungsgeschichte und Archäologie der Ostseegebiete, no. 14 (Kiel: Wachholtz – Murmann Publishers, 2017), 342–73; Oleksiy Komar, "Kiev und das rechtsufrige Dneprgebiet", in *Die Rus' im 9.–10. Jahrhundert. Ein archäologisches Panorama*, ed. Nikolaj A. Makarov, Studien zur Siedlungsgeschichte und Archäologie der Ostseegebiete, no. 14 (Kiel: Wachholtz – Murmann Publishers, 2017), 308–41; Oleksiy Komar, *A korai magyarság vándorlásának történeti és régészeti emlékei* (Budapest: Martin Opitz, 2018), 160–3, 203–11, 393–4, 410.

⁴⁸³ Nikolaj V. Lopatin, "Izborsk", in *Die Rus' im 9.–10. Jahrhundert. Ein archäologisches Panorama*, ed. Nikolaj A. Makarov, Studien zur Siedlungsgeschichte und Archäologie der Ostseegebiete, no. 14 (Kiel: Wachholtz – Murmann Publishers, 2017), 141.

⁴⁸⁴ Oleksandr Mocja, "Le rôle des élites guerrières dans la formation des centres urbains de la Rus' kiévienne, d'après la fouille des tombes", in *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, eds. Michel Kazanski, Anne Nercessian and Constantin Zuckerman (Paris: Éditions P. Lethielleux, 2000), 269–71.

⁴⁸⁵ Natalia Eniosova and Veronica Murashova, "Manufacturing Techniques of Belt and Harness Fittings of the 10th Century AD", *Journal of Archaeological Science* 26 (1999): 1093–100.

Black Grave of Chernigov and the related mourning community were likely subject to influences similar to those of Prince Sviatoslav. There is no doubt that Rus' družinas were ethnically mixed, making it hard to determine the place(s) of origin of the men in the Black Grave of Chernigov. Weapons cannot help, even though some objects, such as double-edged swords, shield bosses and scramasaxes, seem to indicate Scandinavia as a point of diffusion, as sabres, arrows and quivers point towards the steppe. Details of similar graves, however, strongly suggest that the original homeland of many of these military men lay in Scandinavia, even though they followed the fashions of a widespread retinue culture.

Most indicative, of course, are the large barrows; boat burials; Scandinavian cult objects; ritual details, such as placing weapons in a pile during cremation, and the presence of cauldrons and animal skins and bones.⁴⁸⁶ The chamber graves in Russia and Ukraine that closely parallel those in Birka are notable examples;⁴⁸⁷ the grave goods of some of these reveal steppe influence. For instance, a chamber grave from the urban area of Vladimir in Kiev (near the Alexander Nevsky Church) contained grave goods clearly reminiscent of the Magyar material culture of the Carpathian Basin. Besides a Magyar-type quiver and arrows and the Magyar-style fittings of its sabretache, the grave held a viking sword of Petersen type X and a scabbard chape depicting the characteristic falcon motif of the Rus'. This, together with the chamber-grave ritual and the clothing accessories, such as buckles, link the grave to examples in Birka.⁴⁸⁸ Another notable example is a tenth-century chamber-grave in the Shestovitsa VI cemetery. The deceased was buried with a number of Scandinavian weapons – axe, lance, sword and scramasax – and other characteristic artefacts, among them a drinking horn. The chamber also held a horse sacrifice and typical steppe accessories, horse trappings, a conical helmet and sabretaches.⁴⁸⁹ Other burials in the Shestovitsa cemetery and Chernigov's barrows are clearly similar to this pattern.⁴⁹⁰ Fragments of composite bows associated with the družina culture have been discovered in major Rus' settlements and are growing in number; many of these weapons

⁴⁸⁶ Vladimir Petrukhin, "Bol'shiye kurgany Rusi i Severnoy Yevropy. K probleme etnokul'turnykh svyazey v rannesrednevekovyy period", in *Istoricheskaya arkheologiya. Traditsii i perspektivy. K 80-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya D. A. Avdusina*, eds. V. L. Yanin and T. A. Pushkina (Moscow: Pamyatniki istoricheskoy mysli, 1998), 361–9. For an overview of identification of Scandinavian graves, see: Stalsberg, "The Scandinavian Viking Age finds in Rus'".

⁴⁸⁷ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, *Birka IV. The Burial Customs. A study of the graves on Björkö* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1981), 44–5.

⁴⁸⁸ Sunhild Kleingärtner and Michael Müller-Wille, "Zwei Kammergräber des 10. Jahrhunderts aus der Stadt Izjaslavs und Vladimirs in Kiev", *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae* 59, no. 2 (2008): 367–86.

⁴⁸⁹ V. Kovalenko, A. Motsya and Yu. Syty, "Noveyshiye nakhodki v pogrebeniyakh Shestovitsy" [The newest finds in the burials in Shestovitsa], in *Scandinavian Antiquities of Southern Rus'. A Catalogue*, eds. Fedir Androshchuk and Volodymyr Zotsenko (Paris: The Ukrainian National Committee for Byzantine Studies, 2012), 322–50.

⁴⁹⁰ E.g. Ture Algot Johnsson Arne, "Skandinavische Holzkammergräber aus der Wikingerzeit in der Ukraine", *Acta Archaeologica* 2, no. 3 (1931): 285–302; Elena A. Mel'nikova, Vladimir J. Petrukhin and Tamara A. Pushkina, "Drevnerusskiye vliyaniya v kul'ture Skandinavii rannego srednevekov'ya (k postanovke problemy)", in *Drevnyaya Rus' i Skandiniya: Izbrannyye Trudy*, eds. Galina V. Glazyrina and Tatjana N. Jackson (Moscow: Dmitriy Pozharskiy University, [1984] 2011), 289.

and other accessories (quivers, bow cases) have been found in graves furnished in Scandinavian style.⁴⁹¹ Characteristic axes of originally nomadic provenance, called *chekan*, spread extensively in the Kievan Rus' and reached as far as Birka.⁴⁹² One of the largest clusters of this axe type (narrow bladed at one end and pointed at the other), was found in Gnezdovo, the most militarized Rus' location along the Dnieper. Here, in the second half of the tenth century, there was a massive distribution of nomadic armament: helmets, sabres, axes, lances, clubs and whole complexes of equestrian and archer's equipment.⁴⁹³ These are usually found with Scandinavian weapons and accessories (also mail fragments) and eastern objects, such as the caftan found in Grave Dn4.⁴⁹⁴ Thus, the archaeological evidence confirms and extends the picture on how this joint endeavours of Turkic nomads and Rus' effected the latter's military culture.

Military service in the Byzantine Empire

The *austrvegr* led to Constantinople, the region's largest centre in the mental map of contemporary (and judged by the sagas also later medieval) Scandinavians. Although also recruited from Anglo-Saxons, Franks and Normans, the notorious Varangian Guard, which was responsible for the personal defence of the *basileus* himself, was made up of Scandinavians from the eleventh century onwards.⁴⁹⁵ The term Varangian is not mentioned in texts before the eleventh century, but it seems safe to assume that Scandinavian mercenaries had already arrived in Byzantium, not only on the basis of later Icelandic texts, as well as contemporary Byzantine sources mentioning Rus' warriors in Greek service but also through more indirect evidence.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹¹ Kirill A. Mikhailov and Sergej Yu. Kainov, "Finds of Structural Details of Composite Bows from Ancient Rus", *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 62 (2011): 229–44.

⁴⁹² Holger Arbman, *Birka I. Die Gräber* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1940), Tafeln 14/9–10; Anatolij Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie. Vol. 2. Kop'ya, sulitsy, boyevyye topory, bulavy, kisteny. IX–XIII vv.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), 29–31; Jansson, "Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import in Skandinavien", 617; Björn Ambrosiani and Fedir Androshchuk, "Vooruzheniye i vostochnyye kontakty Birki", in *Rus' na perekhrestii svitiv (mizhnarodni vplyvy na formuvannya Davn'orus'koyi derzhavy) IX–XI st. (Chernihiv – Shestovytsya, 20 – 23 lyunya 2006 r.)*, eds. P. P. Tolochko, A. A. Horskyi, M. Dimnik, V. O. Dyatlov, V. P. Kovalenko, O. B. Kovalenko, O. P. Motsya (Chernihiv: Siveryans'ka dumka, 2006), 6, 15–16; Kirill Mikhajlov, "Uppland–Gotland–Novgorod. Russian-Swedish relations in the late Viking Age on the basis of studies of belt mountings", in *Cultural interaction between East and West. Archaeology, artefacts and human contacts in northern Europe*, eds. Ulf Fransson, Marie Svedin, Sophie Bergerbrant and Fedir Androshchuk (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007), 213.

⁴⁹³ Kainov, "Pogrebeniya s predmetami vooruzheniya Gnozdovskogo nekropolya", 238.

⁴⁹⁴ Daniil Avdusin, "Smolensk and the Varangians according to Archaeological Data." *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 2 (1969): 52–62; Daniil Avdusin and Tamara A. Puškina, "Three chamber graves at Gnezdovo", *Fornvännen* 83 (1988): 25–8.

⁴⁹⁵ Jonathan Shepard, "The English and Byzantium: a study of their role in the Byzantine Army in the later eleventh century", *Traditio* 29 (1973): 53–92; Krijna N. Ciggaar, "L'émigration anglaise a Byzance après 1066", *Revue des études Byzantines* 32 (1974): 301–42.

⁴⁹⁶ An old view that all Rus' retainers in Byzantine employ were actually Slavs⁴⁹⁶ is now untenable in light of what has been said so far about early Rus' identity: cf. V. G. Vasilievskiy, "Variago-russkaia i variago-angliiskaia družina", *Trudy* 1 (1908): 355–78.

Sigillographic evidence belonging to little earlier than mid-ninth-century Byzantine military officials, as well as *folles* and *nomismata* struck under Emperor Theophilos (829–42) spread in Rurikogo Gorodische, Gnezdovo, Hedeby, Tissø and Birka, and are connected to vigorous Byzantine diplomatic embassies aspiring to recruit Nordic manpower into the imperial navy or guards.⁴⁹⁷ A little later, written documents start mentioning Scandinavians from the Kyvian Rus' taking up service in Byzantium. In the *De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae*, Constantine mentions 700 Rus' sailors participating in the Cretan campaign of 911.⁴⁹⁸ A provision in the Rus'–Byzantine peace treaty of 912 clearly states that the Rus' could enter Byzantine service whenever they desired.⁴⁹⁹ Encouragement was probably still constantly given the Rus' to join the imperial forces as evidenced by a lead seal of the *prōtopatharios* Leo Logothetes of the imperial treasury, the *Genikon*. The seal in question was found in a household pit alongside Shestovitsa's hillfort and is dated to the first quarter of the tenth century. These high officials, to whom the lead seal belonged, were entrusted with the recruitment and payments of warriors in Byzantine service indicating such businesses conducted with the Rus' at the site.⁵⁰⁰ The flow of troops to Byzantium increased after 988. This was the year when Vladimir besieged the Byzantine city of Cherson but in the same year offered to help Basil II against the revolt of Bardas Phokas by sending a (presumably Scandinavian) contingent – labelled 'Varangian' by the later chronicler – to aid the *basileus*.⁵⁰¹

Serving for years doubtlessly influenced Scandinavians living in Byzantium, who became accustomed to the environment. Many of them were later baptized, and it seems likely that they had their own church in Constantinople, consecrated to Saint Óláfr or the Virgin Mary.⁵⁰² Two mount fragments from the Scandinavian Birka possibly belonging to two helmets. The mounts are embellished with bird motifs thought to have Christian connotations connected to 'Paradise', and were likely brought back to Scandinavia from Byzantium.⁵⁰³ Inga Hägg highlighted how Byzantine orthodoxy and courtly fashion spread among the eastern Scandinavians and Rus'. The veneration of Archangel Michael is reflected in the spread of his symbols – weights and balances – in Birka, whilst a caftan made of Byzantine silk and decorated with the face of an angel was found in a kurgan at

⁴⁹⁷ Jonathan Shepard, "Revisiting the Rus visitors to Louis the Pious", *Byzantinoslavica* 80, no. 1–2 (2022): 59–87.

⁴⁹⁸ Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae*. Vol. 2, ed. Johann Jakob Reiske, CSHB, no. 17 (Bonn: Weber, 1830), 651.

⁴⁹⁹ PVL 19.

⁵⁰⁰ Shepard, "Shestovytsya revisited", 27.

⁵⁰¹ PVL 37, 49–50. For dating and discussion, see: Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 43–4.

⁵⁰² Krijna N. Ciggaar, *Western Travellers to Constantinople: The West and Byzantium, 962–1204: Cultural and Political Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 126.

⁵⁰³ Lena Holmquist Olausson and Slavica Petrovski, "Curious birds—two helmet (?) mounts with a Christian motif from Birka's garrison", in *Cultural interaction between East and West. Archaeology, artefacts and human contacts in northern Europe*, eds. Ulf Fransson, Marie Svedin, Sophie Bergerbrant and Fedir Androshchuk (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007), 231–7.

Chingul (Ukraine) amply testifying the spread of Byzantine orthodoxy among the Rus'. Small pendants in Birka, featuring cymbals and pomegranates, likely connects to Constantine VII's insignia. The Rus' also started to adapt to Byzantine fashions; for instance, wearing locally decorated variants of the well-known Byzantine court dress, the *skaramangion*, and conical silk headgear, fragments of which survived in numerous Swedish and Danish Viking Age graves, most notably at Birka but also in the famous Mammen grave in Bjerringøj.⁵⁰⁴ That the Rus' indeed availed themselves of the cultural amenities in Constantinople is illustrated by their demand for unlimited access to the city's bathhouses in a Rus'–Byzantine peace treaty from 907.⁵⁰⁵ The Byzantine Empire's art of warfare also left an impact on the Scandinavians. The *Laxdæla saga* reports that a 'Varangian' named Bolli Bollason, returning from Byzantine service to Iceland, wielded a *glædel* ('short sword') according to foreign customs.⁵⁰⁶ Even though the description of Bolli's attire in the saga is not completely authentic (a knight painted on his shield could not have been a Viking Age custom), it is still probable that warriors active abroad acquired distinctive new weapons.⁵⁰⁷ Weapons from abroad, especially gifts from rulers, were highly esteemed in the north.⁵⁰⁸ For instance, the armour, Emma, of the most famous Varangian guard, Haralðr Sigurðarsson, was manufactured in Byzantium, if one of the short stories about Haralðr's life is to be believed.⁵⁰⁹ Although finds of Byzantine weapons in Kievan Rus' territory and Scandinavia are rare, some are known and confirm this picture. These include a piece of lamellae armour from Birka's garrison and several Byzantine-type scabbards from Kiev, Turaida (Latvia), Gotland and Ocksarve (Sweden).⁵¹⁰

Scandinavians adapting to Byzantine courtly and military fashions took service alongside Turkic retainers. Parallel to the Byzantine employment of Scandinavian and Rus' troops, Byzantine sources attest to the presence of Khazars and the so-called *Tourkoi* (Turks) among the personnel of the Byzantine bodyguard as early as the late ninth century. Called *Tourkoi*, Byzantine historiography

⁵⁰⁴ Inga Hägg, "Birkas orientaliska praktplagg", *Fornvännen* 78 (1984): 213; Inga Hägg, "Silks at Birka", in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, ed. Fedir Androshchuk, Jonathan Shephard and Monica White, Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 16 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2016), 281–96; Anne Hedeager Krak, "Oriental Influences in the Danish Viking Age: Kaftan and Belt with Pouch", in *North European Symposium for Archaeological Textiles X*, eds. Eva Anderson Strand, Margarita Gleba, Ulla Mannering, Cherine Munkholt and Maj Ringgaard (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), 114–6.

⁵⁰⁵ PVL 17.

⁵⁰⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Laxdæla saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, no. 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 225.

⁵⁰⁷ Anna Zanchi, "'Melius abundare Quam Deficere': Scarlet Clothing in Laxdæla Saga and Njals Saga", in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, Vol. 4, eds. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 32–3.

⁵⁰⁸ Scott Ashley, "How Icelanders Experienced Byzantium, Real and Imagined", in *Experiencing Byzantium. Papers from the 44th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies. Newcastle – Durham, April 2011*, eds. Claire Nesbitt and Mark Jackson (London: Routledge, 2013), 217–20.

⁵⁰⁹ *Snegluhalla þátr*, in *Flatexjarbok. En samling af norske kongesagaer*. Vol. 3, eds. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Carl Rikard Unger (Christiania: P. T. Mallings, 1868), 418.

⁵¹⁰ Fedir Androshchuk, "What does material evidence tell us about contacts between Byzantium and the Viking World c. 800–1000?", in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, eds. Fedir Androshchuk, Jonathan Shephard and Monica White (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2016), 104–5.

usually meant Magyars in this period.⁵¹¹ During the Bulgarian–Byzantine battles in 894, the Byzantine bodyguard troops defeated by the Bulgarian Tsar Symeon the Great (893–927) included Khazar warriors, whose noses Symeon cut off and sent to the Byzantine court.⁵¹² At the turn of the ninth century, Hārūn ibn Yaḥyā, a Muslim prisoner of war in Constantinople, described Khazars and Turks among the guards at the city gates and among the emperor’s bodyguard.⁵¹³ In his list of Byzantine offices and court precedence in 899, the Byzantine official Philotheos confirms that the imperial bodyguard’s officers included Magyars (*Tourkoi*) and Khazars, among others.⁵¹⁴ Constantine also mentions steppe warriors in Byzantine service, with 84 Magyars (*Tourkoi*) taking part in Romanos Lekapenos’ (920–44) Italian campaign.⁵¹⁵ Liutprand of Cremona (in 986) also reports that Emperor Nikephoros Phokas II (963–9) captured 40 Magyar warriors in 966, all of whom were accepted into the emperor’s bodyguard.⁵¹⁶ The influence of Byzantine fashion also reached the steppe retainers; Emperor Nikephoros, for instance, made the captured Magyar warriors dress according to Byzantine fashion in “valuable garments” (*vestibus ornatos*).⁵¹⁷ Turkic retainers who carried out duties during ceremonial events at the court wore the finest Byzantine clothing.⁵¹⁸ Turkic guards encountered by Hārūn ibn Yaḥyā bore gilded spears, shields and lances.⁵¹⁹ Thus, various foreign groups living in the empire adopted local cultural styles.

During the tenth century, continuous and parallel mentions of Rus’, Pharganian, Khazar, Magyar and probably Pecheneg warriors (*Toulmatzoi*) among the palace guard are mentioned in Constantine’s *De ceremoniis*.⁵²⁰ Besides bodyguard duties in the capital, common campaigns were another possible contact sphere for Turkic, Scandinavian and Rus’ retainers. Rus’, Pharganian, Khazar and Magyar warriors all took part in the ‘Langobard’ (Lombard) campaign of 935.⁵²¹ The note in the *Annales Baresnes* for the year 1027 (probably referring to events of 1025) records Magyars, Rus’ and Guandali, sometimes identified as Varangians, among the Byzantine auxiliary forces that participated

⁵¹¹ Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantium and the Magyars* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher, 1970), 37; Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica. Die Byzantinischen Quellen der Geschichte der Türkvölker*, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 320–7; István Zimonyi, “Why were the Hungarians referred to as Turks in the Early Muslim Sources?”, in *Néptörténet – Nyelvtörténet: A 70 éves Róna-Tas András köszöntése*, eds. László Károly and Éva Nagy Kincses (Szeged: SZTE BTK Altajisztikai Tanszék, 2001), 201–12.

⁵¹² Immanuel Bekker (ed.), *Theophanes continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius monachus*, CSHB, no. 33 (Bonn: Weber, 1838), 853–5.

⁵¹³ BGA I–7, 120–4; Zimonyi, *Muslim Sources on the Magyars*, 86–7.

⁵¹⁴ Nicolas Oikonomidés, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles* (Paris: CNRS, 1972), 208–9; see also: Zimonyi, *Muslim Sources on the Magyars*, 87–9.

⁵¹⁵ Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis aulae*, Vol. 2, 466.

⁵¹⁶ Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana*, ed. Joseph Becker, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, no. 41 (Hannover: Hahn, 1915), 199.

⁵¹⁷ Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Relatio de legatione*, 199.

⁵¹⁸ Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis aulae*, Vol. 2, 576–9.

⁵¹⁹ BGA I–7, 124.

⁵²⁰ Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis aulae*, Vol. 2, 579, 661–8.

⁵²¹ Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, *De cerimoniis aulae*, Vol. 2, 660–1.

in the Italian campaign.⁵²² Conflict could have arisen at the court between the Scandinavian and some Turkic retainers during the reign of Emperor Michael V (1041–2), who changed his bodyguards to ‘Scythians’ (possibly nomads).⁵²³ After his death, however, Scandinavians were again installed in their former positions.

Thus, in tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantium, the presence of Turkic, Scandinavian and Rus’ bodyguards and retainers is almost continuously verifiable, which raises the possibility that these groups were in close contact with each other. Written accounts about steppe impact on Scandinavian retainers in Byzantium is not available, but archaeological material (which will be discussed later) might be linked to the common Turkic–Scandinavian duties in Constantinople.

Military service in the Khazar Khaganate

It was a well-established custom among the Eurasian nomads to employ foreign bodyguards.⁵²⁴ The Khazar Khaganate also availed itself of foreign fighting troops even if the precise status and role of these is not always clear. Nevertheless, besides the originally Turkic nomad Khazar mounted warrior elite, the Rus’ were also found in the Khazar war machine. Mas’ūdī is the one who recounts that “the Rūs and the Ṣaqāliba . . . served as mercenaries and slaves (‘*abīd*’) of the [Khazar] king”.⁵²⁵ The term *Ṣaqāliba*, as already discussed, referred mostly to people of Slavic origin in this period. It is also known from Mas’ūdī that in Itil, the Khazar capital, Rus’ were in the ruler’s service together with Jews, Muslims and steppe nomadic people.⁵²⁶ The Khazars themselves were of Turkic origin, although Mas’ūdī’s wording seems to indicate the presence of other steppe people in contemporary Itil: “The pagans who live in this country belong to many different races, among which are the Ṣaqāliba and the Rūs”.⁵²⁷ Since according to this account, the Rus’ and the Ṣaqāliba were only part of the country’s pagan population, it can be asserted that other heathen – probably Turkic/steppe – people also lived there, as the context of the source notes Jews and Muslims separately.⁵²⁸

⁵²² Olajos Terézia, “Egy felhasználatlan forráscsoport a 11. századi magyar-bizánci kapcsolatok történetéhez”, *Századok* 132 (1998): 220–1.

⁵²³ Michel Psellos, *Chronographie ou histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976–1077)*. Vol. 1, 2nd ed., ed. Émile Renauld (Paris: Société d’édition “Les Belles Lettres”, 1967), 95.

⁵²⁴ György Györffy, “Dual Kingship and the Seven Chieftains of the Hungarians in the Era of the Conquest and the Raids”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 47, no. 1 (1994): 87; Peter B. Golden, “Some notes on the comitatus in Medieval Eurasia with special reference to the Khazars”, *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 28 (2001): 153–70; Peter B. Golden, “The Khazar Sacral Kingship”, in *Pre-Modern Russia and Its World. Essays in Honor of Thomas S. Noonan*, eds. Kathryn L. Reyerson, Theofanis G. Stavrou and James D. Tracy (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2006), 79.

⁵²⁵ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d’or*, Vol. 2, 12; Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 133. Arabic edition mine.

⁵²⁶ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d’or*, Vol. 2, 10–12.

⁵²⁷ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d’or*, Vol. 2, 9; Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 132.

⁵²⁸ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d’or*, Vol. 2, 8.

Dating the Rus' service in Khazaria is difficult. There were wars between the Rus' and Khazars prior to Mas'ūdī's time, which could result in Rus' and Slavic prisoners taken and conscripted into the Khazar forces, but this is speculative. It has also been posited by James E. Montgomery that the ruler called *chacanus* (khagan) of the Rus' envoys who arrived at the court of the Frankish king Louis the Pious in Ingelheim in 839 did not mean the ruler of a separate Rus' khaganate but referred to the Khazar khagan himself.⁵²⁹ This would date the appearance of the Rus' in Khazar service to the 830s. This interpretation, however, is in conflict with Ibn Rusta's report, who locates the Rus *khāqān* to an island in a lake far in the forest belt.⁵³⁰ In any case, the Arabic author would have been expected to recognize if the ruler of the Rus' would have been the Khazar khagan, about whom he talks separately.⁵³¹ I similarly doubt Montgomery's view that even the Rus', who appear in Ibn Faḍlān's famous description of 922, would have been the Khazars' 'slave soldiers'.⁵³² The group Ibn Faḍlān describes came to conduct commercial business in Bulgar and actually traded in slaves. According to the testimony of the Muslim emissary, the Volga Bulgars were trying to become independent from the khaganate at just that time,⁵³³ so linking or mentioning Khazar–Rus' (slave) warriors to the current situation would be expected from the report. The only secure reference point remains Mas'ūdī. Prince Sviatoslav's campaign against the Khazars took place in 965/969, which is close in time to Mas'ūdī's report about Rus' warriors in Itil. Theoretically Rus' and steppe warriors could have (and probably) fought on both sides in the Rus'–Khazar war. So far, we refrain ourselves to note that the Rus' served alongside Turkic warriors here, probably as military slaves of the khagan.

The socio-cultural implications of such service and the Rus' warriors' position within the Khazar state will be traced in Chapter 5. This might be a peculiar case and concern a minor group of Rus' warriors, however, it is beyond controversy that the Khazars also inflicted a deeper and more widespread impression on the ruling warrior elite of the ninth-tenth-century Rus'. Khazar ideologies left remnants within this warrior culture reflected in the memory of a once-were Rus' khagan or khaganate. Several examples indicate that the ruling structure of the Rus' might indeed have been inspired by the Khazar world. Most famous is the adoption of the title khagan by an early Rus' ruler in East. This is not only mentioned in the *Annales Bertiniani* regarding the Rus' delegation to Louis the Pious in Ingelheim treated above, but by a Carolingian correspondence,⁵³⁴ and other unrelated sources as well. Ibn Rusta, and other Islamic authors copying the 'Anonymous Relation' and later

⁵²⁹ Montgomery, "Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources", 163–4.

⁵³⁰ BGA I–7, 145.

⁵³¹ BGA I–7, 139–40.

⁵³² Montgomery, "Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources", 163.

⁵³³ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 190–1, 238–41.

⁵³⁴ Erich Caspar (ed.), *Epistulae Karolini aevi V*. MGH Rerum Germanicarum medii aevi epistolarum, no. 7 (Berlin: Weidmannos, 1928), 388.

Jayhānī, talk about a swampy island, where the Rus' and their *khāqān* dwell.⁵³⁵ Later Slavic sources, such as Ilarion the Metropolitan of Kiev, the Russian *byliny* called *Slovo o pŭlku Igorevĕ* (The Tale of Igor's Campaign) and a graffiti in the Kievan Saint Sophia cathedral, also preserved the memory that Rus' rulers were sometimes called khagans.⁵³⁶ Speculations about the nature and whereabouts of this Khaganate are legion,⁵³⁷ which are not central for the present argument. However, the connotations (and consequences) of a Rus' borrowing of the title from the Khazars, given the rigid rules of transmitting this title or the consequences for raising their ruler on an equal footing with the Khazar khagan, is interesting.⁵³⁸ If the memory of such a ruler among the Rus' is nothing else than a reflection of Muslim opinions on the similarity and vicinity of Rus' and Turkic groups,⁵³⁹ the persistent presence of the title in other than Muslim sources invites a strong political and cultural interaction between the two.

In Ibn Faḍlān's *Kitāb*, the Arabic envoy, although fails to mention it by the title khagan, famously describes the customs of a Rus' king, a *malik* in Arabic, as tremendously akin to that of the Khazar khagan. The Rus' *malik* is a sacred ruler who never leaves his palace, is protected by an elite guard to the extreme, and is surrounded by concubines, whilst leaves the practical government of his polity to a deputy.⁵⁴⁰ According to the text, the Rus' retinue, on account of the ruler's death followed him into the afterlife. The factuality of the description of the Rus' *malik*'s court is often doubted and again will be the subject of more thorough discussion later. It is enough to state now that the Rus' ruling model depicted by Ibn Faḍlān is almost identical to the Khazar double-kingship and is unique in its specificity. Curiously, throughout ninth-tenth-centuries, main political events are largely governed by Rus' leaders acting in pairs; such as Askold and Dir in the 860s', Oleg and Igor in the first part, Sviatoslav and Sveneld in the second half of the tenth (the latter also holding important positions under Igor), and finally Vladimir and Dobrinja in the late tenth century. These pairs are known from the narrative of the PVL constructed well after the events, however, they might represent faint reflections deprived of the original meaning and context of a ruling model described by Ibn Faḍlān.

⁵³⁵ BGA I–7, 145; Göckenjan and Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte*, 180, 212, 234.

⁵³⁶ A. M. Moldovan, "Slovo o zakone i blagodati" Ilariona (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1984), 77–196; Simon Franklin (trans.), *Sermons and Rhetoric of Kievan Rus'* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 3–29; D. S. Likhachev, A. Yu. Chernov, A. V. Dybo and S. K. Rusakov (intr., ed. and trans.), *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (Saint-Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2006), 116, 313; S. A. Vysotskiy, *Drevnerusskiye graffiti Sofii Kiyevskoy XI–XIV vv.*, Vol. 1 (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1966), 49–52.

⁵³⁷ For references and the debate, see: Katona, *Vikings of the steppe*, 37–9.

⁵³⁸ Peter B. Golden, "The Question of the Rus' Qaganate." *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982): 85–97.

⁵³⁹ Hraundal, *The Rus in the Arabic sources*, 175–81.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 253–7; for discussion see: Benjamin P. Golden, "The Khazar Sacral Kingship", in *Pre-Modern Russia and Its World. Essays in Honor of Thomas S. Noonan*, eds. Kathryn L. Reyerson, Theofanis G. Stavrou and James D. Tracy (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag. 2006), 79–102.

The promiscuity of the Rus' *malik* is likewise mirrored in the eastern Slavic historical tradition connected to *velikiy knyaz* Vladimir, and might be explained similarly.⁵⁴¹ Vladimir – himself designated as khagan by Ilarion's text – was famous for his polygyny. According to the PVL, in 980 he took a rival chief's, Rogvolod's daughter as wife by force in spite of the girl's reluctance.⁵⁴² After occupying Kiev from his brother Yaropolk, Vladimir also consummated a son with his brother's wife, a Greek woman.⁵⁴³ The psychological portrait of him preserved in the PVL is further telling:

“Now Vladimir was overcome by lust for women. His lawful wife was Rogned...By her he had four sons: Izyaslav, Mstislav, Yaroslav, and Vsevolod, and two daughters. The Greek woman bore him Svyatopolk; by one Czech he had a son Vysheslav; by another, Svyatoslav and Mstislav; and by a Bulgarian woman, Boris and Gleb. He had three hundred concubines at Vyshgorod, three hundred at Belgorod, and two hundred at Berestovo in a village still called Berestovoe. He was insatiable in vice. He even seduced married women and violated young girls, for he was a libertine like Solomon. For it is said that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines.”⁵⁴⁴

The condemnation of the PVL's author(s) reflects his Christian opinion on the subject; in Christianity such scornful behaviour was not tolerated. These details unlikely to have interested the chroniclers – who supposed to be writing about the greatness and sanctity of the *knyaz* – were there no historical roots behind this personage, stemming from more ancient habits. That this is not an invention solely on part of the chroniclers is proved by the similar image of Vladimir in foreign sources. Thietmar of Merseburg laments in length about the wicked deeds of Vladimir as an ‘unrestrained fornicator’ (*fornicator immensus*),⁵⁴⁵ whilst *Heimskringla* knows about an additional wife of his, named Allógiá.⁵⁴⁶ These statements invite comparison with those of Ibn Faḍlān about the court of the Khazar khagan who lived with his 60 concubines and 25 wives taken mostly by force from subjugated rulers.⁵⁴⁷ It seems like *knyaz* Vladimir's image confines to what was believed about a khagan.

The title khagan, traces of a double-rulership and promiscuity among Rus' rulers are elements which gives Ibn Faḍlān's somewhat garbled-looking and fantasized report a flavour of historicity. It

⁵⁴¹ Gábor Gyóni, “A Ruzs Kaganátusról (a skandináv és sztyeppeti hatalmi modellek konvergenciája)”, in *Vikingek a Kárpát-medencében*, ed. János Dani (forthcoming).

⁵⁴² PVL 36.

⁵⁴³ PVL 37.

⁵⁴⁴ PVL 37.

⁵⁴⁵ Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, 487–8.

⁵⁴⁶ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 231–2.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 256–7.

is hard to imagine that Khazar influence left the warriors serving in a lord's retinue untouched, and in this context the *malik's* retinue members, owning slave girls and devoting their lives to follow him into the afterlife does not seem so extreme. This issue will be further scrutinized in chapter 5 and leads along a similar trail.

Military service in Hungary

The possibility of hiring Scandinavian and Rus' bodyguards has also been proposed in the case of Hungary, a theory less well-known in western historiography. As early as the 1950s, noted Hungarian medievalist György Györffy asserted that 'Varangian-Rus' mercenaries' were in the service of Grand Prince Géza and the first king, Saint Stephen I, from the end of the tenth century onwards.⁵⁴⁸ Even though his hypothesis was questioned by Gyula Kristó (another famous Hungarian medievalist and contemporary of Györffy) on chronological and linguistic grounds,⁵⁴⁹ the thesis is still popular in scholarly circles.⁵⁵⁰

According to this theory, 'Varangian-Rus' bodyguards were present in Hungary in the 980s, near the end of Géza's reign, when the Pechenegs were becoming a serious threat on the Dnieper waterways. This prompted the Rus' to march from Kiev to Constantinople (and back) through the Magyar territories, which were believed to be more friendly, and some of them entered Géza's service.⁵⁵¹ Migrating Rus' bodyguards could have come to Hungary in larger numbers with time since, according to the PVL, Stephen (who followed Géza on the throne) maintained good relations with Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev.⁵⁵² The presence of Magyar warriors in Vladimir's court was supported by archaeological material from the so-called *druzhina*-graves.⁵⁵³ Besides the believed bodyguard exchange between the Kievan and the Hungarian courts, a wave of 'Varangians' arrived in Hungary with the Byzantine fiancée proposed for Stephen's son, Emeric.⁵⁵⁴ Since Emeric is labelled as *dux Ruizorum*, that is, "Prince of the Rus'", in the contemporary *Annales Hildesheimenses*

⁵⁴⁸ Györffy, *Tanulmányok a magyar állam eredetéről*, 86–92, György Györffy, "Államszervezés", in *Magyarország története. Előzmények és magyar történet 1242-ig*, Vol. 1, ed. Antal Bartha (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984), 831–32; György Györffy, *István király és műve* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, [1977] 2013), 313–4.

⁵⁴⁹ Gyula Kristó, "Oroszok az Árpád-kori Magyarországon", in Gyula Kristó: *Tanulmányok az Árpád-korról* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1983), 191–208.

⁵⁵⁰ For references, see Csete Katona, "Vikings in Hungary? The Theory of the Varangian-Rus Bodyguard of the First Hungarian Rulers", *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 17 (2017): 23–60.

⁵⁵¹ Györffy, *Tanulmányok a magyar állam eredetéről*, 92.

⁵⁵² PVL 56.

⁵⁵³ Galimdzán Tagán "Honfoglaláskori magyar sír Kijevben", *Folia Archaeologica* 3–4 (1941): 311–3; András Borosy, "Vélemények a kora-feudális fejedelmi kíséretéről", *Acta Historica* 70 (1981): 34; István Fodor, "Olmin dvor. Bemerkungen zu einem Ortsnamen der Russischen Urchronik", *Folia Archaeologica* 53 (2007): 193–9.

⁵⁵⁴ Gyula Moravcsik, "Görögnyelvű kolostorok Szent István korában", in *Emlékkönyv Szent István király halálának kilencszázadik évfordulóján*, Vol. 1, ed. Jusztinián Serédi (Budapest: MTA, 1938), 388–422; Györffy, *Tanulmányok a magyar állam eredetéről*, 92; Ferenc Makk, *Ungarische Aussenpolitik (896–1196)* (Herne: Tibor Schäfer Verlag, 1999), 37.

in the year 1031,⁵⁵⁵ Györffy claimed that he was the leader of the royal bodyguard, as traditionally the heir to the throne commanded the foreign auxiliaries. As the argument continues, the ‘Varangians’ escorting Emeric’s fiancée from Byzantium could have been settled near the central territories of the kingdom, in Tolna and Somogy counties, where the name of two settlements, Várong and Varang, seem to have an Old Norse root – *væring*. In contrast, retinue members arriving from Kiev might have come to reside not far from the contemporary frontiers, as is suggested by settlement names with the Hungarian stem *orosz*, originating from the word Rus’. The secondary meaning of *orosz*, ‘bodyguard’ or ‘doorkeeper’, strengthens this point,⁵⁵⁶ although Kristó argued that this meaning did not appear before the sixteenth century.⁵⁵⁷ The Varangian-Rus’ bodyguard in Hungary was paralleled with analogous institutions in Kiev, Poland and Byzantium.⁵⁵⁸

We can only back up this theory with meagre written evidence. Individual cases of Scandinavians taking Hungarian service surely could occur in the campaigns of Sviatoslav, where the Rus’ and the Magyars were allies. In addition, the meeting in Quedlingburg in 973 where both the representatives of Prince Géza and Haraldr *blátönn* (‘bluetooth’) Gormsson (958–86) were present, would have been an opportunity for similar exchanges. Also, a French source composed between 1136 and 1140 by the Anglo-Norman chronicler Geffrei Gaimar, for instance, mentions a Danish lord named Walgard who accompanied fugitive Anglo-Saxon princes, the sons of Edmund Ironside, to Hungary as they were fleeing their homeland from the wrath of Knútr *inn ríki*.⁵⁵⁹ These sources naturally do not offer any certainties, but if any Scandinavian warriors appeared in Hungary during this period they would have had close contact with nomadic military culture. The Hungarian army still consisted mostly of steppe nomadic light cavalry, which – although we lack contemporary descriptions – is a valid viewpoint. Light cavalry and associated tactics and weaponry did not disappear from the military culture of the Hungarians even in the High Middle Ages. Double-edged swords from the end of the tenth and early eleventh century are found in pagan graves indicating that the change of armament and a turn towards Christian burial was a long process. Many of these graves, in addition, contain bows and arrows, thought to be the weapons of light cavalry. Sabres were used continuously in the Hungarian army’s armament too. In addition, other steppe nomadic warrior groups were also frequently present as auxiliaries of the Hungarian kings during the Árpád Age. Thus, the continuity of nomadic style

⁵⁵⁵ Georg Isidore Waitz (ed.), *Annales Hildesheimenses*, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, no. 8 (Hannover: Hahn, 1878), 36.

⁵⁵⁶ Györffy, *Tanulmányok a magyar állam eredetéről*, 83–92, György Györffy, *Az Árpád-kori Magyarország történeti földrajza* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1966–98): Vol. 1, 126, 464–5, Vol. 3, 365–6, Vol. 4, 169–71.

⁵⁵⁷ Kristó, “Oroszok az Árpád-kori Magyarországon”, 199–201.

⁵⁵⁸ Györffy, *Tanulmányok a magyar állam eredetéről*, 87–92, Györffy, *István király és műve*, 108, 313, 417.

⁵⁵⁹ Geffrei Gaimar. *Estoire des Engleis. History of the English*, ed. and trans. Ian Short (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 251–3.

cavalry under Saint Stephen is more than suggestive.⁵⁶⁰ The pagan population of Hungary survived Saint Stephen, as his own and later laws' forbidings against pagan practice testify, together with pagan revolts in 1046 and 1060–1 led by rural groups wearing traditional pony-tail haircuts according to nomadic custom.⁵⁶¹

The case of the Kylfings is another topic related to the question of Scandinavian retinue members in Hungary. The Scandinavian name, Kylfingar, occurs in various forms in medieval sources as the Slavic *kolbiagi* and the Greek *koulpingoi*, always differentiated from the Rus' and Varangians. The Kylfings remain largely unknown; there is not even agreement on the nature of their organization, whether they should be considered a tribe or some kind of association. Various attempts to trace their original ancestry illustrate the ambiguities; theories about the Kylfings see them as Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish or Slavic in origin.⁵⁶² Hungarian historiography often associates the Kylfings with the Kölpénys, a nomadic tribe, possibly of Pecheneg origin. According to the Hungarian chronicle *Gesta Hungarorum*, they arrived in Hungary during the reign of Grand Prince Taksony (955–c. 72), judging by the personal name Kölpény in the chronicle.⁵⁶³ According to Györffy, Saint Stephen's new royal army, which included heavy cavalry, was partly recruited from among the Kylfings,⁵⁶⁴ but there is no evident sign of this in the sources.

Modern western research expresses doubt on the connection between the two names,⁵⁶⁵ but I am less sceptical, mostly due to the obscurities in the history of the Kylfings. The Kylfings appeared in various areas of the Nordic and eastern regions, and thus their organization might have been similar to that described for the Rus': a merchant-warrior group that was active in Northern Europe, the Baltics, European Russia and Byzantium.⁵⁶⁶ Different sources in which they appear, including *Russkaya Pravda*, place names along the Baltic coast, Swedish runestones, Icelandic works and Byzantine chrysobulls corroborate this.⁵⁶⁷ Their absence from the Arabic sources, which were mostly concerned with the affairs in the Volga area, is remarkable and either indicates that they were absent or less active there, or perhaps that they were known by a different name.

⁵⁶⁰ János B. Szabó, *A középkor magyarországi könnyűlovassága. X–XVI. század* (Máriásbesnyő: Attraktor, 2017), 138–67.

⁵⁶¹ Nora Berend, József Laszlovszky and Béla Zsolt Szakács, "The Kingdom of Hungary", in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 335, 338–40.

⁵⁶² Theodore Andersson, "Kylfingar", in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Vol. 17, ed. Heinrich Beck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 520–2.

⁵⁶³ György Székely, "Hungary and Sweden – Historical contacts and parallels in the Middle Ages", in *Hungary and Sweden. Early contacts, early sources*, eds. Folke Lindenberg and György Ránki (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975), 11; Zoltán Tóth, "A Botond-monda eredete s az anonymusi Botond-hagyomány", *Hadtörténeti Közlemények* 35 (1988): 467–83; Loránd Benkő, "Barangolások egy ómagyar tulajdonnév körül", *Magyar Nyelv* 95 (1999): 25–40.

⁵⁶⁴ Györffy, *István király és műve*, 313.

⁵⁶⁵ Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, 143–44.

⁵⁶⁶ Holger Arbman, *The Vikings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), 90–1.

⁵⁶⁷ Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, 142–51.

With an organization similar to that of the Rus', the Kylfings would also have been adaptable, taking up local customs and norms, and could easily have become acclimatized to Slavic, Scandinavian and Turkic cultures. The Kylfings, who plundered the Sámi in the Icelandic *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* during the tenth century,⁵⁶⁸ were perhaps more closely related to the Scandinavian cultural milieu than the Kylfings, who somehow joined Pecheneg tribes in the Dnieper area and arrived in the Carpathian Basin in the time of Prince Taksony. Evidence from his reign mentions the immigration of Volga Bulgharian and Pecheneg groups.⁵⁶⁹ The Pecheneg Suru Kül Bey tribe, perhaps the origin of the name Kölpény, lived near the Khazar Empire.⁵⁷⁰ Their territory lay west of the Dnieper River, next to the route that Rus' and probably also Kylfing warrior-merchants took on their way to Constantinople. Lack of further concrete evidence leaves the identification of the Kylfings with the Hungarian Kölpénys as speculation.

The question of a Scandinavian retinue in Hungary is tinted by archaeological evidence. Some Scandinavian weapons, mostly straight double-edged swords found in Hungary, have also been ascribed to the retinue formed by Géza and Stephen,⁵⁷¹ despite the fact that they were stray finds or came from graves furnished with typical Magyar-style objects. A sword, thought to belong to Stephen himself as claimed in a later medieval inventory note of the fourteenth century, and kept now in the Saint Vitus cathedral in Prague, is decorated in the Mammen style. Where did it arrive from into the possession of the first Hungarian king (if it indeed did) is unknown. Its hilt was produced in the Jelling centres of Denmark, and as most eloquent Mammen style objects, it could signal diplomatic contacts with the Jelling dynasty.⁵⁷² Finding viking weapons in Hungary would also strengthen the theory of a Rus' bodyguard, but only a single burial seems to be relevant to the possibility of a Scandinavian warrior being buried in Hungary. This has been interpreted as containing a "high status Rus' warrior" buried partially according to Magyar customs.⁵⁷³ The burial, dated to the tenth century, was discovered in the Székesfehérvár-Rádiótelep site (Grave 'A'), but the grave was disturbed and poorly

⁵⁶⁸ Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Íslensk fornrit, no. 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979), 27–8.

⁵⁶⁹ Taksony himself took a wife from the land of the Cumans (*de terra Cumanorum*); however, during his reign, the Cumans were not present in Eastern Europe, and thus the chronicler probably employed an ethnic designation of his own time for the inhabitants of the Pontic steppe. Thus, Taksony's wife may have come from the Pechenegs or the Volga Bulgars. In addition, the gesta also notes three Muslim immigrants with the name Billa, Baks and Hetény from Bular, referring to Volga Bulgharia. Tonuzoba, a Pecheneg prince, also arrived in Hungary during Taksony's reign and received lands along the Tisza River. János M. Bak and Martyn Rady (eds. and trans.), *Anonymus and Master Roger*, Central European Medieval Texts Series, no. 5 (Budapest: CEU Press, 2010), 127.

⁵⁷⁰ DAI 168–9.

⁵⁷¹ Györffy, *István király és műve*, 108.

⁵⁷² Sten Tesch, "Att parera eller paradera. Ett tusenårigt svärdshjalt från Sigtuna och dess europeiska sammanhang", *Situne Dei* (2015): 14–27.

⁵⁷³ Kovács László, "Előkelő rusz vitéz egy Székesfehérvári sírban. A rádiótelepi honfoglalás kori A. sír és kardja", in *Kelet és Nyugat között. Történeti tanulmányok Kristó Gyula tiszteletére*, ed. László Koszta (Szeged: Szegedi Középkorász Műhely, 1995), 291–308.

documented, and therefore hardly can be interpreted more concretely than contemporary *rittergraver* in the Nordic world and Eastern Europe. Several swords (e.g. *Fig. 4.*), and a spear decorated in the Ringerike style (*Fig. 5.*), have been also found in Hungary, showing clear connections to Scandinavia based on typology and ornamentation.⁵⁷⁴ These weapons, however, are mainly stray finds; interpreting them as signs of a ‘Varangian-Rus’ retinue’s armament is questionable. It seems more likely that the Hungarian army adopted these weapons for its own use. Attempts to adapt weapons to local use can also be discerned in some examples usually labelled ‘hybrid sabre-swords’ in which a straight double-edged blade was inserted in a curved sabre grip.⁵⁷⁵ They are found in the Baltic region and Russia as well as in Hungary. Some of Saint Stephen’s coins spreading in substantial numbers in Scandinavia⁵⁷⁶ could have been brought back as mercenary payment just as some Byzantine coins interpreted as such, but this is not possible to prove.

Although the evidence for the theory accumulated incoherently and hard to prove,⁵⁷⁷ the title of Emeric as *dux Ruizorum* is a solid piece of evidence for the Rus’ contacts of the Hungarian courtly elite. Based on this and the analogies of such service elsewhere, we should still entertain the possibility that some Scandinavians and Rus’ indeed took service in Hungary. The evidence can be best synthesized by assuming that the Rus’ bodyguards only stayed in the country for a short time and left after Emeric’s death in 1031. Their settlements in the countryside preserving the stem *orosz* can perhaps be explained as supply stations on the kingly itinerary where Rus’ bodyguards assured the king’s safety. Both written and material evidence indicate that there were various interactions between Hungary and Scandinavia as well as the Kievan Rus’ in the period, and nomadic and Scandinavian/Rus’ culture came into cultural as well as military contacts.⁵⁷⁸ Saint Stephen’s court was already a Latin, Christianized environment, whilst its population and probably a considerable part of his army was still more reminiscent of the former steppe environments. We have no idea how

⁵⁷⁴ Peter Paulsen, *Wikingerfunde aus Ungarn im Lichte der Nord- und Westeuropäischen Frühgeschichte* (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 1933); Kovács László, “Die Budapester Wikingerlanze. Geschichtsabriss der Ungarischen Königslanze”, *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 22 (1970): 324–39; István Fodor, “On the Contacts of Hungarians with the Baltic area in the 9th–11th centuries. From an Archaeologist’s Point of View”, *Hungarian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1986): 217–26.

⁵⁷⁵ Kirpichnikov, *Drevnerusskoe oruzie*, 34, 61; Ádám Bíró, “Dating (With) Weapon Burials and the »Waffenwechsel«: A Preliminary Report on New Investigations of the so-called Viking-Age Swords in the Carpathian Basin from a Chronological Point of View”, in *Die Archäologie der frühen Ungarn. Chronologie, Technologie und Methodik. Internationaler Workshop des Archäologischen Instituts der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften und des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz in Budapest am 4. und 5. Dezember 2009*, ed. Tobias Bendeguz (Mainz: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 202–3.

⁵⁷⁶ Lajos Huszár, “Der Umlauf ungarischer Münzen des XI. Jahrhunderts in Nordeuropa”, *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 19 (1967): 175–200; István Gedai, “The Circulation and the Imitation of Hungarian Coins in North Europe”, in *Proceedings of the International Numismatic Symposium*, eds. István Gedai and Katalin B. Sey (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980), 133–5.

⁵⁷⁷ Katona, “Vikings in Hungary?”.

⁵⁷⁸ Katona, *Vikings of the steppe*, 80–93, 160.

Scandinavian or Rus' retainers experienced their stay here, but contacts with the Northern spheres – perhaps through these military channels – is testified in the archaeological record.

Military service elsewhere

The presence of Scandinavians in early medieval Poland stirred fierce debates among Polish scholars. Apart from retrospective Old Norse accounts, no trustworthy contemporary records have survived about 'viking' warriors taking service in the territory of the early Piast state. Doubtful interpretations to read a Scandinavian pedigree into Mieszko I's lineage based on the *Dagome iudex* document and determined endeavours to find the famous Jomsborg stronghold of the notorious viking elite force, the Jomsvíkings, as it was described in their saga, was refuted by modern critical studies.⁵⁷⁹ The discussion regarding the presence of Scandinavian warriors in Poland, however, is still an issue especially among archaeologists. For instance, it was long held in historiography that Scandinavians were interred in the graves at Lutomiersk. This has been challenged recently, and instead the cemetery is argued to hold Slavic military elite.⁵⁸⁰ It is undeniable, however, that Scandinavian military elites were present in Poland, as for instance in Cieple, as indicated by strontium isotope analyses and chamber grave rituals as well as objects (for instance double-edged swords) characteristic for mounted weapon graves elsewhere in the Viking world.⁵⁸¹

In addition, both nomadic and Scandinavian military cultures were present in Poland. The army of the Polish prince Bolesław the Brave (992–1025) launched at Kiev was accompanied by Magyar and Pecheneg auxiliaries.⁵⁸² Long periods of service are surmised from the information that Bolesław interfered in a dispute between his Polish and Pecheneg troops and put the latter to the sword, which indicates that they were his own warriors rather than mercenaries under their own command.⁵⁸³ According to the PVL, after the Kievan campaign in 1018, Bolesław returned home with elite

⁵⁷⁹ Piotr Boroń, "Norsemen and the Polish Territories in the early Middle Ages – theories, ideas and speculations", in *Scandinavian Culture in Medieval Poland*, ed. Sławomir Moździoch, Błażej Stanisławski and Przemysław Wiszewski (Wrocław: Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2013), 33–51; Władysław Duczko, "With Vikings or without? Scandinavians in early medieval Poland. Approaching an old problem", in *Scandinavian Culture in Medieval Poland*, ed. Sławomir Moździoch, Błażej Stanisławski and Przemysław Wiszewski (Wrocław: Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2013), 19–31; Gregory Cattaneo, "The Scandinavians in Poland: a re-evaluation of perceptions of the Vikings", *Brathair* 9, no. 2. (2009): 2–14; for a critical introduction, see: Leszek Gardela, "Vikings in Poland. A critical overview", in *Viking World: Things, Spaces and Movement*, ed. Marianne Hem Eriksen, Unn Pedersen, Bernt Rundeberget, Irmelin Axelsen and Heidi Lund Berg (Oxford: Oxbow, 2015), 213–34.

⁵⁸⁰ Leszek Gardela, "Lutomiersk Unveiled. The Buried Warriors of Poland", *Medieval Warfare* 8, no. 3 (2018): 42–50.

⁵⁸¹ Sławomir Wadył, *Cieple. Elitarna nekropola wczesnośredniowieczna na Pomorzu Wschodnim* (Gdańsk: Muzeum Archeologiczne w Gdańsku, 2019), 547–74.

⁵⁸² Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, ed. Robert Holtzmann, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum Nova Series, no. 9 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1935), 530.

⁵⁸³ Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, 382.

prisoners of war,⁵⁸⁴ who might have been enrolled in his retinue. Analogous state formation processes might also indicate that other Scandinavians also arrived to Polish service from the north voluntarily.⁵⁸⁵ Thus, during Bolesław's reign, retainers of Scandinavian and steppe (culturally Turkic) origin both came into contact with the Polish *druzhina*.

The cemetery of Bodzia on the Vistula in Central Poland is one of the biggest twenty-first-century discoveries of Polish archaeology.⁵⁸⁶ The forms and contents of the graves differ from normal Polish cemeteries of the period in several ways, most notably in Scandinavian, Rus' and nomadic Khazar elements, suggesting that the population of the nearby settlement was multi-ethnic. Weapons among the grave goods and injuries on the bones make it evident that some of the inhabitants were warriors. The Scandinavian element at Bodzia was clear in chamber-like burials closely analogous to those widespread in Denmark and Sweden. Weapons, a *langsax* and a sword decorated in the Mammen style, were recovered, and precious-metal objects, such as a pendant with a dragon-head end, also signal Nordic contacts. Multiple burial pits with annexes, the stylistic features of two silver pendants, a nomadic battle axe and the custom of 'sprinkling' the deceased with beads and coins, as in one of the women's graves, are all features supporting the interpretation that Bodzia's population included Khazar elements. Rus' were also found, indicated by the symbol of Sviatopolk I of Kiev (1015–19) on a belt fitting (*Fig. 6.*). As the only Rus' ruler using the sign of the Rus' bident with a cross on the right prong, it has been suggested that the owner of the belt was close kin of Sviatopolk (or maybe even the prince himself). The Bodzia cemetery is an outstanding example of how foreign connections and cultural mergers shape a community and how far such cultural packages might travel.

Based on the presence of viking weapons, mostly double-edged swords and a shield boss, found in the territory between the Volga and Kama rivers, and in Biljar and Bulgar, archaeologists believe that a similar Scandinavian Rus' retinue operated in the Muslim-convert court in Volga Bulgharia.⁵⁸⁷ Besides the swords, the archaeologist developing this idea, Iskander L. Ismailov, built his argument on parallel institutions, among which he enumerated the Hungarian Rus' retinue. The possibility that

⁵⁸⁴ PVL 63.

⁵⁸⁵ Jonathan Shepard, "Conversions and Regimes Compared: The Rus' and the Poles, ca. 1000", in *East Central & Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Florin Curta (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 269–70.

⁵⁸⁶ For the following discussion on Bodzia, see the collection of essays in Andrzej Buko (ed.), *Bodzia. A Late Viking-Age Elite Cemetery in Central Poland* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁵⁸⁷ Iskander L. Izmailov, "Balymerskiy kurgannyi mogil'nik i yego istoriko-kul'turnoye znachenie", in *Slavyane, finno-ugry, skandinavyy, volzhskiy bulgary. Doklady mezhd. nauchnogo simpoziuma po voprosam arkheologii i istorii 11–14 maya 1999 g. Pushkinskiye gory*, eds. Anatoliy N. Kirpichnikov, E. N. Nosov and A. I. Saksa, (Saint Petersburg: IPK Vesty, 2000), 70–86; Iskander L. Izmailov, "Balymerskii kurgannyi mogil'nik i 'rusy' na Volge: Problemy i diskussii", in *Velikii volzhskii put'. Materialy II-go etapa mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferencii "Velikii Volzhskii put'"*, Sankt-Petersburg, Stockholm, 5–14 avgusta 2002 goda, ed. R. N. Musina (Kazan': Institut istorii Akademii Nauk Respubliki Tatarstane, 2003), 50–69; Anatoliy Kirpichnikov and Iskander Izmailov "Karolingskie mechi iz Bulgarii (iz fondov Gosudarstvennogo ob'yedinennogo muzeya Respubliki Tatarstan)", in *Srednevekovaya Kazan': Vozniknovenie i razvitie. Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferencii, Kazan', 1–3 iunia 1999 goda*, eds. K. Sh. Iskhakov, R. S. Khakimov, M. A. Usmanov and F. Sh. Khuzin (Kazan': Master Lain, 2000), 207–18.

some Rus' warriors entered Volga Bulghar service cannot be ruled out and might be connected to Turkic cultural borrowings in the Volga area that demonstrate the close link between Scandinavians and the local population in the region. It has also been suggested that particular indigenous Volga Bulghar coins struck in the 950s and 970s might also be signs of Swedish mercenary activity in Volga Bulgharia. These specific dirhams are abundant in Sweden but rare in the Kievan Rus' and have been interpreted as military pay brought back to the Scandinavian homelands directly from Bulgharia.⁵⁸⁸ Fifteen kurgans date to the mid-tenth century were found in Balymer, interpreted as a remnant of a Scandinavian armed elite force. The burial rite of cremation in all cases and two swords of Scandinavian provenance, one intact and the other deliberately bent, indeed allow the identification of a Scandinavian mercenary force on Volga Bulgharian territory, even if only short lived. If a Volga Bulghar–Scandinavian retinue indeed existed, it is probable that the warriors were not wielding only their traditional viking weapons but also using local weaponry and fighting techniques. Volga Bulghar military and cultural influence – in the form of weapons, steppe ornaments and treasure – is attested in adjacent areas of the Ural region, where Finno-Ugrian people lived.⁵⁸⁹ The merging of Scandinavian and steppe cultures can be detected on a nomadic-style axe found in the Kazan region that is decorated with a scene of the Germanic Siegfried legend clearly based on Scandinavian models (*Fig. 7*).⁵⁹⁰ Kurgan number 13 of the Balymer complex also shows this fusion; besides the clearly Scandinavian style of the burial rite, objects of steppe origin were also found in the grave. These include pottery from the Saltovo-Mayaki culture, copper plates from a bridle, harness covers and belt bag fittings, all analogous with Magyar material from the Carpathian Basin.⁵⁹¹

At the other end of the spectrum lay Birka. The town has yielded rich grave goods of eastern origin; three clusters can be differentiated that point towards Volga Bulgharia (the cemetery of Tankeevka offers the closest parallels), Hungary and Byzantium.⁵⁹² Although it might have arrived from Byzantium, lamellae from an armour found in Birka is of 'Old Turkic type', dated between 900 and 950 and is most closely paralleled in Kurgan 11 from Balyk-Sook in the Altai mountains.⁵⁹³ Multiple finds of steppe origin found in the garrison of Birka probably belonged to Scandinavian warriors who had spent a long time in contact with steppe groups, acquired their fighting habits and adopted their

⁵⁸⁸ Roman K. Kovalev, "Were there direct contacts between Volga Bulgaria and Sweden in the second half of the tenth century? The numismatic evidence", *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 20 (2013): 89.

⁵⁸⁹ A. M. Belavin, *Kamskiy torgovyy put'. Severnoye Predural'ye v yego ekonomicheskikh i etnokul'turnykh svyazyakh* (Perm': Permskiy gosudarstvennyy pedagogicheskiy universitet, 2000), 111–20.

⁵⁹⁰ Lesley Abrams, "Connections and exchange in the Viking Worlds", in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, eds. Fedor Androshchuk, Jonathan Shephard and Monica White (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2016), 41–50.

⁵⁹¹ Izmailov, "Balymerskiy kurgannyi mogil'nik i yego istoriko-kul'turnoye znachenie", 74–80.

⁵⁹² Ambrosiani and Androshchuk, "Vooruzheniye i vostochnyye kontakty Birki".

⁵⁹³ Niklas Stjerna, "En stäppnomadisk rustning från Birka", *Fornvännen* 99 (2004): 27–32.

weaponry.⁵⁹⁴ This could have happened in the Byzantine border zones, but equally could have resulted from the presence of both Scandinavians and Turks in Byzantine imperial bodyguards.⁵⁹⁵ The Scandinavians could have learned how to shoot with nomadic bows from the Magyar bodyguards during guard duties or common campaigns. Certain finds from Birka can be associated explicitly with Magyar material culture of the tenth century – sabretaches, finger rings, remains of bows and quivers – and might be evidence of Magyar–Scandinavian contacts in Constantinople.⁵⁹⁶ Other examples of steppe culture related to military groups, most notably ‘oriental’ belt mounts and fittings, are found in other places in the Baltic area and Scandinavia.⁵⁹⁷ Thus, the Magyar features discernible at Birka are only one example among a number of indications of the circulation of artefacts and motifs among the Baltic, Rus’, Byzantine and Magyar milieus.

Lastly, there is evidence for the presence of Scandinavian/Rus’ warriors elsewhere. Based on two Germanic names of possible Norse origin in a ninth-century hagiographic source, and a few Scandinavian-style military attire – a stirrup from Zbečno, a belt buckle from Libice and a few double-edged swords –, it is sometimes postulated that Scandinavian warriors also served in Bohemia.⁵⁹⁸ A warrior grave in Prague Castle was, for political reasons, also interpreted as a viking warrior for a while, but no ethnic identification is possible based on the grave goods alone which are quite uniform to contemporary retainer graves everywhere in Eastern Europe.⁵⁹⁹ The evidence, therefore, is admittedly scant, and we shall return to the question of the two names only in the last chapter. As what concerns Georgia, an intact mercenary force of Norse origin participated in the Georgian civil wars of the mid-eleventh century as documented in the Georgian Chronicles. They participated in the Battle of Sasireti in 1042 fought between King Bagrat IV (1027–72) and Duke Liparit IV (c. 1030–59). The notorious mid-eleventh-century expedition recorded in the Icelandic *Yngvars saga* and

⁵⁹⁴ Fredrik Lündström, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and Lena Holmquist Olausson, “Eastern archery in Birka’s Garrison”, in *The Martial Society. Aspects of warriors, fortifications and social change in Scandinavia*, eds. Lena Holmquist Olausson and Michael Olausson (Stockholm: Archaeological Research Laboratory, 2009), 105–16.

⁵⁹⁵ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, “Close Encounters with the Byzantine Border Zones: On the Eastern Connections of the Birka Warrior”, in *Scandinavia and the Balkans. Cultural Interaction with Byzantium and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium AD*, eds. Oksana Minaeva and Lena Holmquist (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 158–73.

⁵⁹⁶ Hedenstierna-Jonson, “Magyar – Rus – Scandinavia”; Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, “Traces of Contacts: Magyar Material Culture in the Swedish Viking Age Context of Birka”, in *Die Archäologie der frühen Ungarn. Chronologie, Technologie und Methodik. Internationaler Workshop des Archäologischen Instituts der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften und des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz in Budapest am 4. und 5. Dezember 2009*, ed. Tobias Bendeguz (Mainz: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 29–46.

⁵⁹⁷ Jansson, “Communications between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe”; Jansson, “Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import in Skandinavien”; Jansson and Nosov, “The way to the East”.

⁵⁹⁸ Emil Walter, “Namnen Tunna och Gommon i tjekkiska legender och kronikor”, in *Studia Slavica Gunnaro Gunnarson sexagenario dedicate*, ed. Józef Trypućko, *Studia Slavica Upsaliensia*, no. 1 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1960), 147–96; Jaroslav Ludvíkovský, “Tunna und Gommon – Wikinger aus der Pragen Fürstengefolgschaft?”, *Folia diplomatica* 1 (1971): 171–88; Jan Machula, “Foreign items and outside influences in the material culture of tenth-century Bohemia”, *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 8 (2002): 73–5.

⁵⁹⁹ Nicholas J. Saunders, Jan Frolík and Volkey Heyd, “Zeitgeist archaeology: conflict, identity and ideology at Prague Castle, 1918–2018”, *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019): 1009–25.

several Swedish runestones, was also linked to these events, although the connection is difficult to prove.⁶⁰⁰ Lastly, at the end of the tenth century, there is additional available data on Rus' warriors in another distant location. A quite trustworthy source, the *Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb*, relating the history of Derbent, records a Rus' force between 987 and 989 in the service of Maymūn ibn Aḥmad, the emir of Derbent.⁶⁰¹ A systematic discussion on Scandinavian retainers in these locales is not possible on the lack of sufficient evidence and bear no consequence for the Turkic influence detectable in the other locales. They do illustrate, however, the wide-ranging network of contemporary Scandinavian warrior groups, and the pertaining information will resurface in later chapters.

Final remarks

Scandinavian and Rus' retainers or mercenaries were sought after in various courts of the Viking Age East. For some areas the evidence is detailed and convincing, in other cases its less firm, however, the growing body of archaeological evidence is promising in this regard. A wide geographical distribution of fighting groups from Poland through Byzantium, Hungary, the Kyvian Rus', to Volga Bulgharia, Khazaria and even the Caliphates as well as Georgia is itself illustrative of the martial qualities of these warriors and that of their ambition for gaining experience, wealth and prestige in far-away locales. No doubt that many of these scenarios concerned short term services in the form of mercenary service or occasional alliances, but long-term agreements struck between retainers and lords individually or as intact fighting units is discernible too in the better documented areas, especially in the Kievan Rus' and Byzantium.

As an outstanding feature of service in the eastern courts, Scandinavians and Rus' often adopted local customs. This can partly be attributed to the ethnically mixed nature of contemporary retinues, the flexibility of the social environment, and the adaptability of the retainers themselves. Scandinavians in Constantinople developed a taste for Byzantine fashions and lifestyles; those in Kiev readily accepted Slavic notions and members into the elite military caste, and in Itil they probably became accustomed to Muslim and Turkic forms of service. If the retainers' opportunity to change courts is taken as a serious possibility, the options for creating one's own style in a military-cultural sense were almost infinite when we consider various combinations of fighting habits (infantry, navy, cavalry, archers) and hardware (clothing, weaponry). It is noteworthy that Scandinavian groups were affected by diverse cultural habits and thus could also become different from each other.

⁶⁰⁰ Jonathan Shepard, "Yngvarr's expedition to the east and a Russian inscribed stone cross", *Saga-Book* 21 (1984–85): 222–92; Mats G. Larsson, "Yngvarr's expedition and the Georgian Chronicle", *Saga-Book* 22 (1986–89): 98–108.

⁶⁰¹ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 45–6 (Arabic: 19).

The steppe Turkic impact stands out among the foreign impulses that affected the Scandinavians in the East. The interaction between nomadic horsemen and Scandinavians started in two ways and had slightly different, although certainly overlapping, effects in relation to cultural and military borrowings. First, Scandinavian and Rus' warriors participated in campaigns as hired mercenaries and auxiliary troops in the service of most of the courts in the region. In all the places where the Scandinavians' presence as hired warriors is assumed (Byzantium, Kievan Rus', Khazaria, Volga Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland) – as auxiliaries, retinue members or forced conscripts – written sources attest that people of steppe origin also took service at the same time. Many of these power centres or their enemies controlled armies trained for steppe nomadic warfare. While on campaign, the Scandinavians would probably have witnessed the overpowering superiority of cavalry in clashes fought in the open. This also occurred when nomads were hired as auxiliaries in an army consisting mostly of Scandinavian and Rus' infantry, which similarly accustomed them to fighting alongside cavalry and at the same time acquiring related tactics and strategies. Although Scandinavians were well aware of the use of horses in military contexts as early as the Vendel period (c. 540–790),⁶⁰² open battles in Viking Age Scandinavia were fought on foot in close formation.⁶⁰³ Several independent accounts about the Rus' emphasize that they fought on foot.⁶⁰⁴ From the tenth century onwards the growing influence of horsemen in Rus' fighting units, seen in both textual descriptions and archaeological material, suggests that they became accustomed to the nomadic fighting habits of mounted warfare.

Scandinavian and Rus' warriors were also employed more permanently in the regional courts as bodyguards or parts of larger retinues. These services were probably built on a greater level of trust than occasional military alliances and resulted in longer service. During common bodyguard duties with other nomads, Turkic cultural borrowings were perhaps more easily transmitted to Scandinavian retainers. These could have been manifested in a universal retinue culture or fashion in which retinue members adopted and disseminated culturally diverse elements of attire, clothing and weapons from the fringes of the Muslim world to Scandinavia, and in-between. Joint campaigns in retinue service were still significant, however, providing space and time for various groups to adapt to each other and new fighting techniques and weapons. As alluded to in the previous chapter, this might have even facilitated the development of new sword types in the Rus' better suited for mounted warfare.

⁶⁰² Johan Engström, "The Vendel chieftains – a study of military tactics", in *Marital Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, AD 1–1300*, eds. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen and Birthe L. Clausen, The National Museum Studies in Archaeology and History, no. 2 (Copenhagen: PNM, 1997), 248–55.

⁶⁰³ Gareth Williams, *Weapons of the Viking warrior* (Oxford: Osprey, 2019), 42–50.

⁶⁰⁴ BGA I–7, 146; Minorsky, *Marvazī on China, the Turks and India*, (Arabic) 23; Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 62; Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 134.

It is also evident that the military contingents of both Scandinavians and Turks in the period did not all function the same way. Military retinues and armies in the East operated differently, which probably had consequences for the relationships within ethnically and culturally diverse warrior groups. In the same way as a certain environment affected the retainers themselves, to some extent diverse warrior components also shaped the local military system. Scandinavians or Rus' and steppe nomads were, or could be, used as substitutes for each other or to balance power relationships among military units serving within a polity (e.g. Byzantium and Khazaria – for the latter see Chapter 5).

How mixed fighting units were created and held together so as to be effective, especially in the Rus' territories and Birka, is best approached through anthropological theories – in-group formation and identity fusion – recently been applied to the operation of Viking Age warbands. Viking Age retinues and larger armies were heterogenous in both social and ethnic terms and heterogeneity weakened their cohesiveness. Therefore, smaller units of an army, like the retinues often called *lið* in Scandinavian sources, were held together by creating solidarity and shared identities through sets of common traits that did not characterize outsiders. Their primary means of doing this was to be selective about how men were accepted into the in-group. Members were expected to live up to a warrior ideal that advocated reckless behaviour on the battlefield, and their acceptance into the in-group was sealed by ritual oaths. Material markers were also meant to create a distinctive cultural image shared by the whole group. The ideals of the in-group were advocated to young members in poetry recited at communal feasts, where bonds between members were also re-affirmed. A common sense of belonging was further strengthened by traumatic experiences while on campaign, creating lasting bonds sometimes stronger than kinship ties. A shared world view or ideology was the final binding bond in a warrior community.⁶⁰⁵

Many of these strategies can be envisaged for the ethnically mixed fighting units described earlier. Rus' warriors are said to have worn gold bracelets on which oaths of allegiance were sworn in Viking Age Scandinavia.⁶⁰⁶ Sanctioning oaths taken on bracelets and weapons during the Byzantine–Rus' peace negotiations also implies that the practice of binding rituals was also widely practised in the East.⁶⁰⁷ The Viking Age warrior ideal expressed in contemporary runic inscriptions and skaldic poems expected a warrior “not to flee” from battle and to distance himself from battlefield horrors.⁶⁰⁸ Both Ibn Rusta and Miskawayh report a similar form of ideal conduct among the Rus', stressing the

⁶⁰⁵ Raffield, “Bands of brothers”; Hedenstierna-Jonson, “Warrior identities in Viking-Age Scandinavia”.

⁶⁰⁶ BGA I–7, 145; Martinez, “Gardīzi's two chapters”, 168; Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 126.

⁶⁰⁷ PVL 17, 24, 26.

⁶⁰⁸ Judith Jesch, “Constructing the warrior ideal in the Late Viking Age”, in *The Martial Society. Aspects of warriors, fortifications and social change in Scandinavia*, eds. Lena Holmquist Olausson and Michael Olausson (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2009), 71–8.

courage of Rus' warriors as they never fled from battle.⁶⁰⁹ Others who could live up to these ideals were readily admitted to the in-group, illustrated by the appearance of Slavic names among the members of the Rus' warrior elite in later Rus'–Byzantine treaties and by the evidence for Rus'–Turkic co-operation in warfare described earlier. One can similarly imagine how a conglomeration of Scandinavian, Rus' and Turkic warriors gathered in a leader's hall could facilitate the later development of literary genres like the Russian *byliny*, songs reminiscent of both Icelandic sagas and steppe ballads. Such merriment was regular part of co-joined campaigns as reported by Skylitzés about the conglomeration of Rus', Magyar and Pechenegs corps in front of Arcadiopolis passing their nights in camp with drinking, dancing and singing escorted with flutes and cymbals.⁶¹⁰

Distinctive material markers of mixed Scandinavian–Turkic warrior groups can also be detected in the archaeological record. Burials of mixed style, incorporating both originally Scandinavian and Turkic grave goods, attest an 'intercultural' warrior elite culture that included not only Scandinavians, steppe nomads and other ethnicities but also people with mixed or even multiple identities. The Scandinavian retinue buried in the Balymer kurgan, the interred in the Dn4 grave of Gnezdovo, the chamber grave of Kiev in Vladimir's town, the horse burials in Shestovitsa and the Black Grave of Chernigov all came from communities that lived combined steppe and Scandinavian lifestyles. Some behaviours learned in the east were even brought back to Scandinavia, as is suggested by a mid-tenth-century burial (men's grave IV) from the Swedish Rösta (Ås parish, Jämtland); a viking sword (Petersen type V) in a grave pointed towards the head of the deceased and a horse was buried next to him facing towards the feet of the human corpse (*Fig. 8.*). These features are quite uncharacteristic for Scandinavian burials, where swords usually point towards the feet, and horses were buried at the feet of the interred. These customs were practised extensively on the steppe, however, and the horse was also placed next to the body in steppe-affiliated Rus' graves in Gnezdovo, Kiev, Shestovitsa, Chernigov and Staraya Ladoga. The Magyar pouch found within the grave at in Rösta also speaks of steppe influence.⁶¹¹

A brief return to the enigmatic Black Grave illustrates the wide-ranging networks of this warrior elite. After restoration, it turned out that one of the swords can be categorized as a special development of type-Z swords (in the terminology of Jan Petersen), which were manufactured in Anglo-Saxon

⁶⁰⁹ BGA I–7, 146; Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 62.

⁶¹⁰ Hans Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, CFHB Series Berolinensis, no. 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973), 289.

⁶¹¹ Vladimir Petrukhin, "Vikingi i step': k probleme vozdeystviya Vostoka na Shvetsiyu v rannem srednevekov'ye", *Divnogorskiy sbornik* 6 (2016): 129–33; Michael Müller-Wille, "Zwei Grabfunde des 10. Jahrhunderts in europäischer Perspektive: Rösta (Grab IV) im nördlichen Schweden und Gnezdovo (Grab Dn-4) im westlichen Russland", in *Zwischen Starigard/Oldenburger und Novgorod*, ed. Michael Müller-Wille, Beiträge zur Archäologie west- und ostslawischer Gebiete im frühen Mittelalter. Stud. Siedlungsgesch. u. Arch. Ostseegebiete, no. 10 (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 2011) 193–206.

England during the early eleventh century.⁶¹² The Þórr figure of the grave, according to recent interpretations, was a *hnefatafl* piece used for a popular board game in Scandinavia.⁶¹³ What was thought to be a Scandinavian scramasax in the grave may now be considered a (magical?) rod instead, parallels of which are known from Gnezdovo and the Swedish island of Öland.⁶¹⁴ New investigations also identified two interesting instruments thought to be scepters associated with pagan rulership.⁶¹⁵ Although a typical pagan grave, the interred (or the mourners) were probably acquainted with Christianity, as indicated by what is probably a cross on the tip of one of the spears found in the grave.⁶¹⁶ A bold hypothesis recently suggested that the name of the mound has historic roots in Old Russian chronicles and reflects the tradition of naming burial places after their interred. A ruler who bore the Slavic name Chern' might have rested in the Chorna Mohyla.⁶¹⁷

Emerging from this cultural interaction, the warrior elite of the Kievan Rus' in the Viking Age, rode horses equipped with steppe horse gear, shot with nomadic bows, wore caftans, conical hats and helmets, as well as nomadic belt fittings and sabretaches and at the same time wielded straight double-edged viking swords, practised cremation rites, rowed boats, played Scandinavian board games and drank from horns. Although they venerated Scandinavian gods, and probably practised Old Norse magic, monotheistic religions may have already started to penetrate their ranks. Some of them bore Slavic names. That these were communities in formation rather than distinct ethnic groups living together and keeping their own traditional habits might be envisaged through objects where the Scandinavian and the Turkic worlds met in fusion. The Chernigov drinking horns with Khazar and Magyar mythological motifs and the nomadic *chekan* from Kazan illustrated with the Völsung legend are the most prominent examples. Owners and transmitters of this blended material culture merged their cultural traditions and likely developed a new (cultural) identity. Their networks extended from Anglo-Saxon England to the Arabic world and Byzantium, a strong reason for making them part of the Viking diaspora. This idea is conveyed in the term: 'vikings of the steppe'. The customs and ritual world related to this developing identity will be the subject of the next chapter.

⁶¹² Kainov, "«Bol'shoy» mech iz Chornoy mogily".

⁶¹³ Murasheva, Orfinskaya and Loboda, "Novaya istoriya' 'idola'", 76–7, 81.

⁶¹⁴ Lushin, "K voprosu o dade Chornoy Mogily", 21.

⁶¹⁵ Murasheva et al. "Barbarian Scepters".

⁶¹⁶ Sergei Yu. Kainov and A. S. Shchhavelev, "Izobrazheniye kresta na nakonechnike kop'ya iz Chornoy mogily (Tekhnologiya i semantika)", in *Drevneyshiye gosudarstva Vostochnoy Yevropy. 2003 god. Mnimyye real'nosti v antichnykh i srednevekovykh tekstakh*, ed. Elena A. Mel'nikova (Moscow: Indrik, 2005), 83–90.

⁶¹⁷ A. S. Shchhavelev, "Izvestiye Ipat'yevskoy letopisi o Chornoy mogile (k voprosu ob imeni pogrebonnogo knyazya)", in *Chernihiv u seredn'ovichniy ta rann'omoderniy istorii tsentral'no-skhidnoi Evropy*, ed. O. B. Kovalenko (Chernihiv: Desnyans'ka Pravda, 2007), 100–5.

Chapter 5

Steppe vikings

Like the Black Grave of Chernigov, in 922 a Rus' ruler was cremated in a boat lavishly furnished with prestige goods on the shores of the Middle Volga near Bulgar. Animals and a slave girl were sacrificed during the funeral. After the cremation, his boat was dragged to the shore and a huge mound was built on top of it. In contrast to the Black Grave, known only through archaeology, this information comes from the eyewitness description of the Arab traveller Ibn Faḍlān.⁶¹⁸ His account offers unique ethnographic insight into the ethno-religious world of a community comparable to the one that created the burial in Chernigov. The Rus' emerge from the report as a militarized and hierarchical society that engaged in long-distance commerce and, similarly to the Kievan Rus', maintained far-reaching networks and connections with various cultures, including Byzantium, the Arabic world and the steppes. Even a cursory glance at the material culture of the group confirms this; the *Rūsiyyah* (as the Rus' are called) are described with axes, Frankish swords and daggers, the last item probably identical to the Scandinavian *scramasax*. Their 'cloak' (also discussed later) left their arms bare; Ibn Faḍlān describes it as a *kisā'*,⁶¹⁹ a general term for Islamic garments wrapped around the body like a toga, an attire that may have been adopted during their annual visits to the Volga Bulghar Muslim converts. They also had silk brocade, which, contrary to expectations, was Byzantine (*al-rūmīy*).⁶²⁰ These Rus' seem to have been part of the same networks as the deceased of the Black Grave of Chernigov. The account complements the archaeological interpretation of culturally mixed graves with several details about customs and beliefs, stories which objects cannot tell. Objects in the Black Grave show undoubted steppe features (or were made on the steppe itself) and attest such links among the Rus' elite. As will be seen, Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue reflects the same influences. The question to be explored is whether shared sets of beliefs or world views can be detected among these mixed communities, which could have worked as effective ideological tools for creating a new identity.

Interactions between the Scandinavian Rus' and the inhabitants of the steppe had cultural consequences in the spheres of war and trade. Customs, ritual practices and beliefs were subject to change and adaptation, which gave rise to an eclectic Rus' culture and identity. The chapter will explore what kinds of change, instigated by Turkic cultures, can be detected in either the external or internal features of Rus' society. I will examine everyday customs and ritual practices separately. Then I will compare elements of Rus' ritual traditions with those of the neighbouring pre-Christian

⁶¹⁸ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 244–53.

⁶¹⁹ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1.

⁶²⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 246–7.

religions in the East to assess how much influence from the steppe can be detected in Rus' religious life and what kinds of variations existed therein.

Fashion and customs

Besides warfare, there was close co-operation between the various steppe people – Khazars, Volga Bulgars, Oghuz', Magyars and Pechenegs – and Rus' in the Volga and Dnieper region as well as perhaps in the Carpathian Basin as well.⁶²¹ As Christian Lübke demonstrated, both of these contacts resulted in the culturally 'others' becoming 'familiar', or even 'friends' in most of the developing states of Eastern Europe,⁶²² thus facilitating cultural appreciation and – in the case of the Rus' – perhaps the adoption of foreign elements into their ways of life. Steppe influence on the Scandinavian Rus' had an everyday dimension that may have contributed indirectly to more abstract shifts in belief. These mainly concern externalities, such as military equipment, dress, jewellery, hairstyles and decorative motifs. One characteristic of the steppe cultural influence on Rus' or Scandinavian culture is that these 'foreign' elements were not simply borrowed but were sometimes combined with traditional Scandinavian features or modified to suit local tastes. This was not assimilation but a combination of indigenous and borrowed elements that gave rise to eclectic (or perhaps new) expressions of identity. The *druzhina* warrior graves with mixed Scandinavian, Slavic and steppe weapons and accessories were discussed above.

Further, co-operation between steppe (Turkic) and Scandinavian Rus' craftsmen is discernible on certain weapon finds. Viking weapons with steppe-style decoration and typical nomadic weapons with Nordic embellishments (or in Scandinavian graves) are known from settlements in and around Kiev.⁶²³ The famous Chernigov drinking horns and the viking sword from Grave 108 of the Kievan Golden Gate, both decorated with palmette motifs, are telling mementoes (*Fig. 2.*; *Fig. 9.*).⁶²⁴ Steppe-nomad weapons, such as the Khoinovsky and the so-called Charlemagne sabres, with Nordic inlays are prominent examples of reverse scenario (*Fig. 10.*). These highly decorative artefacts are known through several publications. A stone mould found in the Podol district of Kiev, inscribed with the epigraph Yazid (meaning 'Turk') has been interpreted as a sign of Turkic–Rus' manufacture,⁶²⁵

⁶²¹ Katona, *Vikings of the steppe*, 68–95.

⁶²² Christian Lübke, *Fremde im östlichen Europa. Von Gesellschaften ohne Staat zu verstaatlichten Gesellschaften (9. – 11. Jahrhundert)*, Ostmitteleuropa in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart, no. 23 (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2001).

⁶²³ First summarized by Arne: Arne, *La Suède et l'orient*, 125–7.

⁶²⁴ Bálint Csanád, *Archäologie der Steppe. Steppenvölker zwischen Volga und Donau vom 6. bis zum 10. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1989), 113–7; Mel'nikova, "Retinue culture, retinue state", 71; Androshchuk and Zotsenko, *Scandinavian Antiquities of Southern Rus'. A Catalogue*, 97.

⁶²⁵ Károly Mesterházy. "A felső-tisza-vidéki ötvösműhely és a honfoglalás kori emlékek időrendje", *Agria* 25/26 (1989–1990): 236–7

although it might also be related to Muslim craftsmen living with the Rus'.⁶²⁶ These artefacts are usually interpreted as proof of vivid cultural transfer between the Rus' and Magyars in the Dnieper area that culminated in the development of merged styles and mutual borrowings of techniques and craftsmen.⁶²⁷

Eastern fashion, in the form of loose baggy trousers, kaftans and hats, spread among the Scandinavians and Rus'. The written evidence includes the buttons and silk garment of the dead Rus' chieftain described in Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue.⁶²⁸ Ibn Rusta's description of the Rus' clothing is as follows: "They use up to a hundred cubits of cloth to make their trousers (*sarāwīl*). The man must wrap himself in the cloth and fasten it between his knees".⁶²⁹ It is debated whether the pantaloons (*sirwāl*) mentioned by Ibn Rusta are eastern introductions into Scandinavian fashion as such baggy trousers are known from several picture stones (Halla Broa IV, Stenkyrka Lillbjärs III, Lärbo Tängelgårda), the famous Oseberg tapestry and well-preserved fragments of a specimen from Hedeby.⁶³⁰ Nevertheless, these might already betray oriental influence.

The same Rus' clothing is described in the *Hudūd* with some additions: "They wear woolen bonnets (*ba sar bar nihādha dāranda*) with tails let down behind their necks" (*dum az pas-I qafā furū hishta*).⁶³¹ A hat topped with a conical tip, probably originating in the Kievan workshops or on the steppe must be mentioned alongside this issue. It has been suggested that the depictions of conical headgear with hanging behind the men's neck on the Lärbo Tängelgårda picture stone actually resembles the *Hudūd*'s description.⁶³² Surviving cap ends are found in Jászberény and Beregszász (now Berehove in Ukraine) in Hungary, Shestovitsa and in Birka (Bj. 581 and 644) (*Fig. 11.*).⁶³³ Such hats are perhaps identical to descriptions found in the written sources.⁶³⁴ Such would be the so-called *qalānis*, the tall cap of the Volga Bulgars, made from soft material suggested by that it was tucked

⁶²⁶ Wladyslaw Duczko, "Viking Age Scandinavia and Islam. An Archaeologist's View", in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia. Acts of a Symposium at Uppsala University June 15–16 1996*, ed. Elisabeth Piltz (Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998), 113.

⁶²⁷ With further references: Katona, "Vikings in Hungary?", 26.

⁶²⁸ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 246–7.

⁶²⁹ BGA I–7, 146; Lunde and Stone (eds. and trans.), *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of the Darkness*, 127. Arabic edition mine.

⁶³⁰ Inga Hägg, *Die Textilfunde aus dem Hafen von Haithabu*, Berichte über die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu, no. 20 (Neumünster: Karl Wachholtz Verlag, 1984), 34–8, 163–8; Matthias Toplak, *Kleidung und Tracht in der altnordischen Sagaliteratur und im archäologischen Fundkontext* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2011), 61–5.

⁶³¹ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-Ālam*, 159.

⁶³² Anna Zanchi, "Headwear, Footwear and Belts in the Íslendingasögur and Íslendingaþættir", in *North European Symposium for Archaeological Textiles X*, eds. Eva Anderson Strand, Margarita Gleba, Ulla Mannering, Cherine Munkholt and Maj Ringgaard (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), 276.

⁶³³ István Fodor, "Honfoglalás kori temető Jászberény határában", *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* (2017): 237–54; Kovács László: „Beregszász–Birka: Beiträge zu den Mützen mit Blechspitze des. 10. Jahrhunderts." *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54 (2003): 205–41; Ingmar Jansson: "Cap mounts", in *From Vikings to Crusader. The Scandinavians and Europe 800–1200*, eds. Else Roesdahl and David M. Wilson (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 261, Fig. 133 (with further references).

⁶³⁴ Cf. Toplak, *Kleidung und Tracht*, 68; Sven Kalming, "A conical bronze boss and Hedeby's Eastern connection" *Fornvännen* 109 (2014): 1–11.

underneath the armpits when wearers greeted the king.⁶³⁵ The Rus' chieftain was said to wear the same type of headgear, a "silk cap (*qalansuwa*) fringed with sable on his head" during his funeral according to Ibn Faḍlān.⁶³⁶ It might also be connected to the 'Rus'ian hat' (*gerzkr hattr*) mentioned in several Icelandic sagas.⁶³⁷ Iconographical evidence also offers related examples but these are similarly subjective to interpretation as the written sources. A figure depicted with a broad axe and a conical hat with a tip was visible on the Hunnestad DR 282 runestone in Sweden (*Fig. 12.*), whilst the Rällinge statue of possibly the god Freyr also wears a conical headgear.⁶³⁸ However, recent archaeological reconstructions on the Bj. 581 Birka specimen suggest that this particular tip belonged to a Caucasian silk headgear best paralleled in the excellently preserved Moschevaya Balka graves.⁶³⁹ Thus, it is not at all sure that these surviving five pieces of hat tips should be treated together, which is also surmised by the very distinct methods of their manufacture⁶⁴⁰ as well as their differing ornamentations. They are, nevertheless, cluster in the very regions which belong to a relatively uniform retinue culture exposed to steppe influence, thus fit under the wide umbrella of 'oriental' clothing affecting the Scandinavians and Rus'.

In addition, textile remnants and buttons belonging to 'oriental' clothing were found in the town of Birka, Ladby and is also known in great numbers from Gnezdovo.⁶⁴¹ Numerous buttons survived cremation in Shestovitsa's kurgans, confirming the presence of kaftan-like dresses also in this settlement.⁶⁴² All this evidence indicates that some Scandinavian traders, possibly somewhere along the Volga, adopted dress styles that were a Muslim–Turkic blend.⁶⁴³

Another object type are sabretaches or pouches widely distributed in the area: besides the Carpathian Basin, these objects or their metal fittings are found in the Volga-Kama area, Kievan Rus' territory (Gnezdovo, Shestovitsa, Chernigov, Kiev, Staraya Ladoga), the Swedish Birka and Rösta (farther north) and even in Denmark (Dollerup).⁶⁴⁴ Over 20 specimen are known from the Carpathian

⁶³⁵ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 228–9.

⁶³⁶ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 246–9. Arabic edition mine.

⁶³⁷ Zanchi, "Headwear, Footwear and Belts", 276–7.

⁶³⁸ James Graham-Campbell, *Viking art*, new ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2021), 157–8.

⁶³⁹ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Warriors wearing silk", in *Vikings in the Mediterranean*, n. e. (2023), 226, 232, Fig. 3.

⁶⁴⁰ Cf. Balázs Jancsik, András Gulyás, Ádám Strohmayer, Judit Szigeti and Attila Türk, "Adatok a 10. századi poncolt süvegcsúcsok és a csövecskés merevítésű tarsolyok elterjedéséhez", in *Hadak Útján. A népvándorlaskor fiatal kutatóinak XXIX. konferenciája Esztergom 2019. november 15–16*, eds. Balázs Sudár and Attila Türk (Budapest: Martin Opitz, 2019), 68–76.

⁶⁴¹ Hägg, "Birkas orientalska praktplagg"; Krak, "Oriental Influences in the Danish Viking Age", 114.

⁶⁴² Shepard, "Shestovitsya revisited", 29–30.

⁶⁴³ Jansson, "Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import"; Egil Mikkelsen, "The Vikings and Islam", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 41; Heiko Steuer, "Mittelasien und der Wikingerzeitliche Norden", in *Die Wikinger und das Frankische Reich. Identitäten zwischen Konfrontation und Annäherung*, eds. Kerstin P. Hofmann, Hermann Kamp and Matthias Wemhoff (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), 217–38.

⁶⁴⁴ N. B. Krylaszova, A. M. Belavin and Attila Türk, "Újabb adatok a honfoglalás kori tarsolyok és tűzkészségek klasszifikációjához Volga-Káma vidéki analógiák fényében", in *Avarok pusztái. Régészet tanulmányok Lőrincz Gábor 60. születésnapjára*, eds. Anders Alexandra, Csilla Balogh and Attila Türk (Budapest: Martin Opitz, 2014), 457–96;

Basin, thus it was often argued that this is a Hungarian peculiarity diffused through trade. The wide distribution and various manufacturing processes these objects in the wider area represent however might suggest otherwise. Sabretaches could equally reflect the spread of manufacturing techniques, and a taste for a common fashion among eastern and Nordic military elites that may have originated in multi-ethnic workshops in the Kiev area.⁶⁴⁵

Hacksilver, frequently used in mercantile exchange in Scandinavia, was some times also decorated with steppe motifs.⁶⁴⁶ Belts from the steppe are notable, too, and were treated in a number of distinguished publications by Ingmar Jansson, which can be expanded with other specimens from Sweden and one from Bornholm.⁶⁴⁷ Steppe and Scandinavian styles were also combined occasionally in women's accessories. Such an example comes from the Vårby hoard found in Sweden, in which suspension loops were added to 'oriental' belt fittings so as to hang, probably from necklaces.⁶⁴⁸ Additional examples are a belt end from Birka (Bj. 838), converted into a brass, and a locket (even suggested to hold eastern aromatics) ornamented with an 'oriental' 'tree of life' motif.⁶⁴⁹ In the chamber grave of a wealthy person in Kiev (No. 49, Izyaslav's town), female jewellery of a blended style was found: some pendants of a necklace were decorated with Magyar palmette motifs, and others from the same necklace were of Scandinavian manufacture and had Nordic decorations.⁶⁵⁰ Some jewellery of Volga Bulghar provenance was also recovered in Gnezdovo.⁶⁵¹ Carnelian amulets with analogies in the Khazarian Saltovo-Mayaki culture also spread in Rus' and Swedish territories.⁶⁵² An equal-armed brooch decorated in the Borre style, found in the Upper Don region in Yelets, was crafted by a Scandinavian artist in Russia with the involvement of a palmette motif.⁶⁵³

Physical evidence of everyday Rus' culture suggesting eastern contacts is apparent in Ibn Faḍlān's description as well. Tattoos on the Rus', for instance, covered their bodies from top to toe and would

István Fodor, "On the Contacts of Hungarians with the Baltic area in the 9th–11th centuries. From an Archaeologist's Point of View", *Hungarian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1986): 217–26; Holger Arbman, *Birka I. Die Gräber* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1940), 222–4, 295, Taf. 129/1a–1b; Petrukhin, "Vikingi i step'", 129–33; Krak, "Oriental Influences in the Danish Viking Age", 113.

⁶⁴⁵ István Fodor, "Honfoglalás kori tarsolylemezeink és keleti párhuzamaik", *Magyar Tudomány* 178, no. 6 (2017): 723–31.

⁶⁴⁶ Jansson, "Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import", 626–7.

⁶⁴⁷ Ingmar Jansson, "Wikingerzeitlicher orientalischer Import in Skandinavien", *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission* 69 (1988): 564–647; Birgitta Hårdh, "Viking Age Uppåkra", in *Från romartida skalpeller till senvikingatida urnesspännen*, ed. Birgitta Hårdh, Uppåkrastudier, no. 11 (Kristianstad: Kristianstads Boktryckeri, 2010), 277–8.

⁶⁴⁸ Jansson and Nosov, "The way to the East", 79; Roesdahl and Wilson (eds.), *From Viking to Crusader*, 234.

⁶⁴⁹ Jansson and Nosov, "The way to the East", 78; Roesdahl and Wilson (eds.), *From Viking to Crusader*, 257.

⁶⁵⁰ Sunhild Kleingärtner and Michael Müller-Wille, "Zwei Kammergräber des 10. Jahrhunderts aus der Stadt Izjaslavs und Vladimirs in Kiev", *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae* 59, no. 2 (2008): 371–75.

⁶⁵¹ Tamara Pushkina, Veronika V. Murasheva and Natalja V. Eniosova, "Der archäologische Komplex von Gnezdovo", in *Die Rus' im 9.–10. Jahrhundert. Ein archäologisches Panorama*, ed. Nikolaj A. Makarov, Studien zur Siedlungsgeschichte und Archäologie der Ostseegebiete, no. 14 (Kiel: Wachholtz–Murrmann Publishers, 2017), 250–81.

⁶⁵² Tamara Pushkina, "K probleme vozdeystviya vostoka na Skandinaviyu i Rus' v rannem srednevekov'ye", *Khazarskiy al'manakh* 17 (2020): 234.

⁶⁵³ Arbman, "Skandinavisches Handwerk in Russland", 119, Fig. 4.

probably be better explained as a borrowing from the East rather than Scandinavia. Even though remote in time, the famous burials preserved in the frozen mounds of the Siberian Pazyryk are other examples where the traces of this body embellishment were found, suggesting that the custom was prevalent in Inner Eurasia.⁶⁵⁴

Sviatoslav's character confirms the idea that Turkic habits may have been influential.⁶⁵⁵ His description in the PVL, cited in the previous chapter, is more akin to that of Inner Asian nomads of the steppe, who lived by raiding sedentary societies, took good care of and honoured their horses, and endured harsh circumstances by consuming simple food and sleeping in the open during campaigns. From Leo Diaconus's account it is apparent that Sviatoslav wore his hair in a ponytail and shaved the rest of his head.⁶⁵⁶ Various sources from the period report that such a hairstyle was unique to the Magyars.⁶⁵⁷ Sviatoslav also wore earrings, a fashion historically associated with the East (nomads and Arabs) rather than with the Scandinavians or Slavs.⁶⁵⁸ Sviatoslav is one of the best examples of the complexity of early medieval ethnic identity: as a descendant of the Rurikid dynasty, he was biologically of Scandinavian origin, just like many of his commanders and warriors; however, he was also the first Rus' prince known to have a Slavic name and, moreover, to lead a nomadic life. Assimilation, however, took time, and the prince was brought up following Scandinavian customs, indirectly confirmed by the presence of his preceptor Asmund, a man clearly of Scandinavian origin.

It should also be noted that steppe influence did not affect all groups evenly and that borrowed material elements (and connected ideas) could be modified to signal a distinctive identity. This tendency echoes behind the words of al-Iṣṭakhrī, who clearly differentiated the short *qurtaq*, a coat or tunic worn by the Rus' from the long version of the same garment worn by the Khazars, Bulghars and Pechenegs.⁶⁵⁹ This contrasts with Ibn Faḍlān's description of the Rūsīya: "they wear neither tunics nor caftans. Every man wears a cloak (*kisā'*) with which he covers half of his body, so that one arm is uncovered".⁶⁶⁰ The *kisā'* was a garment made of wool, usually wrapped around the body⁶⁶¹;

⁶⁵⁴ Hraundal, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus", 85–8.

⁶⁵⁵ Tarras, "Leo Diaconus and the Ethnology of Kievan Rus", 401–5; Jonathan Shepard, "The Viking Rus and Byzantium", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 503; Clare Downham, "Viking Ethnicities", 6.

⁶⁵⁶ Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 166–7.

⁶⁵⁷ Friedrich Kurze (ed.), *Regionis abbatis prumiensis chronicon cum continuatione treverensi*, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, no. 50 (Hannover: Hahn, 1890), 133; Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Relatio de legatione*, 185; Richard Marsina (ed.), *Codex diplomaticus et epistolaris Slovaciae* Vol. 1 (Bratislava: Academiae Scientiarum Slovacae, 1971), 34–5.

⁶⁵⁸ Tarras, "Leo Diaconus and the Ethnology of Kievan Rus", 404–5.

⁶⁵⁹ BGA I–1, 226.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1.

⁶⁶¹ Reinhart P. A. Dozy, *Dictionnaire détaillé des noms des vêtements chez les Arabes* (Amsterdam: Jean Müller, 1845), 383–6.

leaving one arm open was one possible way of wrapping the mantle around the shoulders.⁶⁶² This costume probably originated in the Arab Maghreb and was worn by desert Berbers. Ibn Faḍlān might have used his own terminology to describe foreign attire, but nevertheless the peculiarity of the dress among the Rus' is interesting. It is also curious that Ibn Faḍlān, despite his denial that the Rus' wear caftans, mentions later that their chieftain was buried in a tunic and silk caftan.⁶⁶³ So far, the evidence is ambivalent; the archaeological material clearly confirms that Scandinavians and Rus' wore eastern-type tunics and caftans in the tenth century. The written sources suggest that some groups preferred a short version of this style but that among others it was restricted to high-ranking individuals or else they did not wear it at all.

The inconsistencies in the descriptions should be attributed (in my opinion) to the differences among the various Scandinavian and Rus' communities. An example from the Pechenegs, who (according to Iṣṭakhrī) were said to wear long tunics generally, can help to resolve the contradiction:

“At the time when the Pechenegs were expelled from their country, some of them of their own will and personal decision stayed behind there and united with the so-called Uzes [the Oghuz' – my edition], and even to this day live among them, and wear such distinguishing marks as separate them off and betray their origin and how it came about that they were split off from their own folk: for their tunics are short, reaching to the knee, and their sleeves are cut off at the shoulder, whereby, you see, they indicate that they have been cut off from their own folk and those of their race.”⁶⁶⁴

Costume can work as a powerful marker of identity, and there is evidence to believe that Rus' groups in various situations consciously chose distinctive attire to express a sense of belonging: the motif of a falcon seen in sword scabbard chapes are usually explained as such.⁶⁶⁵ Both the Pecheneg group described in the DAI and the Rus' in Ibn Faḍlān wore different garments than most of the others in their ethnic groups. It also might not be a coincidence that one arm was left uncovered by clothing in the dress styles of both 'atypical' groups. Members of the Pecheneg diaspora cut off their sleeves to show their bare arms, while the Rus' of the Volga turned their cloaks aside to expose theirs. Their naked arms were quite visible, indicated by reports of tattoos seen to cover them.⁶⁶⁶ A body

⁶⁶² Yedida Kalfon Stillman, *Arab Dress. A Short History. From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 51, 88–90. See especially plate 37.

⁶⁶³ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 246–7.

⁶⁶⁴ DAI 168–9.

⁶⁶⁵ Björn Ambrosiani, “The Birka Falcon”, in *Eastern Connections Part One: The Falcon Motif. Birka Studies V.*, ed. Björn Ambrosiani (Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet, 2011), 11–27.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1.

embellishment like this would indeed be worth putting on public display. There is no certainty about the function of the ‘bare-arm garment’, but it seems fitting to suggest that distinguishing attire did convey a departure from the norm, even if the precise message conveyed by the custom could vary.

The norms in external style for Scandinavians venturing to the East, and which group should be identified as the most ‘typical’, however, risks blurring the intricate complexities of contemporary identities. Besides group identities, individual decisions should also be taken into account. Iṣṭakhrī states about Rus’ facial hair that some of the Rus’ shaved and others braided their beards, suggesting that there were individual choices in style in Rus’ communities.⁶⁶⁷ Although being clean shaven was not without precedent in the Viking Age north, it is hard to believe it was common.⁶⁶⁸ Beards in steppe societies at the time were restricted to high-ranking individuals,⁶⁶⁹ and ordinary members shaved regularly, as Ibn Faḍlān reports for the Oghuz’, the Pechenegs and the Baskhirs,⁶⁷⁰ and several independent observers for the Magyars.⁶⁷¹ Al-Iṣṭakhrī’s words about Rus’ dress and facial hair styles may have captured a Rus’ community in a phase of collective, and at the same time individual, transition between habits brought from the homelands and adopted in the East.

The Rus’ ritual world

The ritual world of the Rus’ is a peculiar case within the Viking world. In Viking studies, selective accounts served as comparative material to illuminate the Scandinavian sources, a necessary methodology also employed here to assess the ‘Scandinavianess’ of Rus’ practices and beliefs. However, this ritual world also has to be treated in its own context, inviting not only inner comparisons between the surviving texts but also viewing them within the cultural context of the region. Sources describing tenth-century Rus’ ritual practices at length, however, are few and problematic in several regards. Only three accounts will be explored here, which depict rituals taking place within roughly the same period from 922 to 971.⁶⁷² This 50-year time-span allows to treat the rituals together in chronological terms. The rituals share common features with each other, the wider

⁶⁶⁷ BGA I–1, 226.

⁶⁶⁸ Ármann Jakobsson, “Masculinity and Politics in Njáls saga”, *Viator* 38 (2007): 191–215; Carl Phelpstead, “Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland”, *Scandinavian Studies* 85, no. 1 (2013): 1–19. The later Normans on the Bayeux tapestry are notably beardless, but that is already a Western Christianized environment.

⁶⁶⁹ A. V. Bogachev and D. A. Frantsuzov, “Ibn Fadlan o kostyume tyurkoyazychnykh narodov, vstrechennykh im v 922 godu”, *Izvestiya Samarskogo nauchnogo tsentra Rossiyskoy akademii nauk* 3, no. 2 (2011): 556–7.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 208–15.

⁶⁷¹ See earlier on Magyar coiffure.

⁶⁷² I omit the *Gothikon* here, seemingly a foreign ritual in the Byzantine court of Constantine VII that was argued to involve Scandinavians. This ritual, however, does not seem to connect to Scandinavians’ borrowing of Turkic cultural practices. On the *Gothikon*, see Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 71–6.

Viking world but also the eastern Turkic environment, and illuminate the flexible nature of ritual traditions and connected beliefs. The eclectic nature of the formulating Rus' identity will betray how Turkic influence could penetrate the 'religious' thinking of such a practical warrior-merchant community as the Rus'.

The three texts in question portray four rituals, from which two are comparable in terms of execution and intent, whilst the two others betray beliefs perhaps inspired by that of Turkic elites. The first two are sacrifices performed by Rus' (warrior-)merchants at the Volga River as recorded by Ibn Faḍlān, and on the island of Saint Gregory on their way to Constantinople as depicted in the DAI. The rest two concern a chieftain's funeral along the Volga similarly witnessed by Ibn Faḍlān, and the cremation of hostages and dead warriors carried out by the army of Prince Sviatoslav at the Battle of Dorostolon as described by Leo Diaconus. Whether these rituals depict a tradition more akin to Slavic or Scandinavian culture was and is debated.⁶⁷³ This stems from two facts: first, inconsistencies and a lack of scholarly consensus about the ethnic connotations of the term Rus', and second, that none of these rituals were recorded by the Rus' themselves but by outsiders. Ibn Faḍlān was an Arab emissary of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, and the other two authors were Byzantines: the chronicler Leo Diaconus and someone possibly from the court of Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

This naturally presents obstacles in trying to reconstruct beliefs or practices, since the authors, not belonging to the cultures they describe, could have misunderstood and misinterpreted certain elements or perhaps simply adjusted the information to fit the terminology of their own religious world.⁶⁷⁴ Ibn Faḍlān, for instance, communicated with the Rus' through an interpreter, and Constantine also gathered his information on them through a translator. Leo's source had not even spoken to the Rus', as he had only observed the ritual from a distance. Comparisons and analogies from different sources, however, hint at the cultural backgrounds of the different rites, strengthening the authenticity of the three sources, and illustrating the flexible nature of ritual performances, which surely contributed to the reception of new ideas. This is discernible by comparing the Saint Gregory

⁶⁷³ Jacqueline Simpson, *Everyday life in the Viking Age* (London: Batsford, 1967), 180; Dimitri Obolensky, "The Byzantine Sources on the Scandinavians in Eastern Europe", in Dimitri Obolensky: *The Byzantine Inheritance of Eastern Europe* (London: Variorum, 1982), 158; Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah", 4–5; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 138; Petrukhin Vladimir, "The Dnieper Rapids in "De Administrando Imperio": the trade route and its sacrificial rites", in *The Significance of Portages. Proceedings of the first international conference on the significance of portages, 29 Sept–2nd Oct 2004*, ed. Christer Weesterdahl (Kristiansand: Archaeopress, 2006), 189; Jens Peter Schjødt, "Ibn Fadlan's account of a Rus funeral: To what degree does it reflect Nordic myths?", in *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, eds. Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt and Rasmus Trandum Kristensen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 133–49; Eugenio R. Luján, "Procopius De bello Gothico III 38. 17–23.: a description of ritual pagan Slavic slayings?", *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 11 (2008): 105–12.

⁶⁷⁴ Robert Bartlett, "From Paganism to Christianity in medieval Europe", in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47–54.

Island rituals with those of Ibn Faḍlān's first ritual. The comparison can serve as an analogical backdrop to better comprehend the spread of steppe customs in the region.

Rus' merchants customarily conducted sacrifices during their dangerous passage along the Dnieper to Constantinople where they arrived with slaves and other merchandise to trade. The ritual was performed at Saint Gregory Island, near the mouth of the Dnieper, and is described as follows:

“They reach the island called St. Gregory, on which island they perform their sacrifices because a gigantic oak-tree stands there; and they sacrifice live cocks. Arrows, too, they peg (*pēgníousi*) in round about, and others bread and meat, or something whatever each may have, as is their custom. They also throw lots regarding the cocks, whether to slaughter them or to eat them as well, or to leave them alive.”⁶⁷⁵

Constantine's DAI was put together from various sources and reports between 948 and 952, and information of the Rus' merchants' itinerary derives from his own time. His informant regarding this passage was well-acquainted with the imperial capital as he compares features of the route with everyday realities of Constantinople. He travelled with the company therefore many times, and was most likely a Rus', given his accurate phonetical rendering of the Dnieper rapids in both Old East Slavonic and Old East Norse.⁶⁷⁶ The authenticity of the description is further strengthened by its comparison with that recorded by Ibn Faḍlān about Rus' merchants along the Volga in 922:

“They disembark as soon as their boats dock. Each carries bread, meat, onions, milk, and alcohol to a large block of wood set in the ground. The piece of wood has a face on it, like the face of a man. It is surrounded by small figurines placed in front of large blocks of wood set in the ground. He prostrates himself before the large figure and says, “Lord, I have come from a distant land, with such and such a number of female slaves and such and such a number of sable pelts.” He lists all his merchandise. Then he says, “And I have brought this offering.” He leaves his offering in front of the piece of wood, saying, “I want you to bless me with a rich merchant with many dinars and dirhams who will buy from me whatever I wish and not haggle over any price I set.” Then he leaves. If he finds it hard to sell his goods and has to stay there too many days, he comes back with a second and a third offering. If his wishes are not fulfilled, he brings an offering to every single figurine and seeks its intercession, saying, “These are the wives, daughters, and sons of

⁶⁷⁵ DAI 61. Greek addition mine.

⁶⁷⁶ Mel'nikova, “Rhosia and the Rus in Constantine”, 321.

our lord.” He goes up to each figurine in turn and petitions it, begging for its intercession and groveling before it. Sometimes business is good, and he makes a quick sale. In that case, he says, “My lord has satisfied my request, so I need to compensate him.” He acquires some sheep or cows and kills them, gives a portion of the meat as alms, and places the rest before the large block of wood and the small ones around it. He ties the heads of the cows or the sheep to the piece of wood set up in the ground. When night falls, the dogs come and eat it all up, and the man who has gone to all this trouble says, “My lord is pleased with me and has eaten my offering.”⁶⁷⁷

This second description transmitted to us by an eyewitness is in many ways identical to the first one. First of all, it is apparent from the two stories that both rituals were conducted by merchants regarding a successful business trip, and that this was a regular undertaking every single year. The Volga Rus’ upon mooring at the shores immediately set out to the task and Ibn Faḍlān’s words echoes a customary behaviour to ensure successful dealings with fellow merchants. The ritual depicted in the DAI marks gratitude for safe passage, as it was carried out on Saint Gregory Island, after which the Rus’ were safe from Pecheneg attacks near the Dnieper cataracts. As the text reports: “from this island onwards the Russians do not fear the Pechenegs until they reach the river Salinas”, a tributary of the Danube, where only unfortunate crews had to be afraid of being swept away by the currents to the shore where the Pechenegs still lay in wait.⁶⁷⁸ Therefore, the goals of safely reaching Constantinople where they can oversell their merchandise is largely met by the arrival on Saint Gregory. In addition to this correspondence regarding the mercantile nature of the rituals, in both cases food – bread and meat are common in both accounts – are offered to unnamed idols presumably personifying deities. Animal sacrifices – roosters and sheep or cows – are central to both rituals as well. The ritual space is centred around a wooden structure – an oak tree and a large block of wood –, and is surrounded by pole markers – arrows and smaller logs. The purpose and performance of the rituals’ essence seem to me identical, and the two observers can hardly be accused of inattentiveness or distortion in relation to these specific rituals.

There are, however, slight variations between the execution of the rituals as signalled above, as well as elements unique to each of the two performances. The distinguished role of roosters, the lot casting regarding their fate, and the possibility of consuming the sacrificial meat is unique to the Dnieper ritual, whilst tying animal heads to wooden poles is an element specific to the ritual at the Volga. Therefore, we might be dealing with variants of the same ritual at two different locales.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 242–5.

⁶⁷⁸ DAI 61.

How flexible this customary religious environment was is well illustrated by the analogies of certain ritual practices. I single out here the practice of marking a ritual space with poles. The origin and variants of this custom probably goes back to a Scandinavian tradition. In Scandinavia a circular ritual space was defined, with objects thrust vertically into the ground during the *tjosnublót* rituals performed prior to a duel, as recorded in the Old Norse-Icelandic *Kormáks saga*.⁶⁷⁹ The so-called *staftarpar*, probably ‘fenced cult places’, are also known from Gotlandic contexts and are mentioned in *Guta saga*.⁶⁸⁰ Birger Nerman argued that spears struck vertically around what was possibly a tree found in Gudingsåkrarna in Gotland should be interpreted as a clear analogy for the ritual on Saint Gregory island.⁶⁸¹

Ibn Faḍlān’s description, in which the Rus’ tie “the heads of the cows or the sheep to that piece of wood set up in the ground”,⁶⁸² is also closely resembled by a near contemporary source. The tenth-century Arab emissary, Ibn Ya’qūb al-Ṭurṭūshī, writes that the inhabitants of the Scandinavian commercial town of Hedeby celebrate a feast by sacrificing an ox, a ram, a goat or a pig, which they then hang outside in front of their houses on a pole to make it visible to everyone.⁶⁸³ However, when a horse’s head was piked on a single pole it could symbolize a protector spirit to frighten away malign spirits, as *Egils saga* relates.⁶⁸⁴ Stakes personifying deities as around Volga is not unparalleled either in the Viking world: pegging a single pole in the ground served as an object of pagan worship, according to *Ragnars saga*.⁶⁸⁵ Ritual performances and connected beliefs were highly flexible and could be replaced or combined, as illustrated by the following list:

1. Poles as markers of ritual space: *Kormáks saga*, *Guta saga*, Ibn Faḍlān, DAI
2. Poles as objects of worship: *Ragnars saga*, Ibn Faḍlān, DAI (the tree)
3. Poles as protector spirits: *Egils saga*
4. Poles with animal heads: *Egils saga*, Ibn Ya’qūb, Ibn Faḍlān

What is striking at first glance is that certain elements of a ritual could be omitted occasionally or combined in other rituals, and identical elements could serve various purposes. Animal heads

⁶⁷⁹ *Kormáks saga*, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, no. 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939), 237.

⁶⁸⁰ Peel Christine (ed.), *Guta saga. The History of the Gotlanders*. (London: Viking society for Northern research, 1999), 4–5, 27–9.

⁶⁸¹ Birger Nerman, “En fornsvensk fågelkult”, *Fornvännen* (1942): 385–9.

⁶⁸² Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 244–5.

⁶⁸³ Georg Jacob, *Arabische Berichte von Gesandten an germanische Fürstenhöfe aus dem 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1927), 29; Harris Birkeland, *Nordens historie i middelalderen etter arabiske kilder* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1954), 103–4.

⁶⁸⁴ Nordal (ed.), *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, 171.

⁶⁸⁵ *Saga af Ragnari Konungi Lodbrok ok sonum hans*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda*, ed. Carl Christian Rafn, Vol. 1, (Copenhagen: Hardvig Fridrek Popp, 1829), 298–9.

mounted on poles during a celebratory ritual in Hedeby served as protector spirits in Iceland and were mutually useful for marking out ritual space and as offerings to deities along the Volga. Furthermore, a combination of several intentions playing some kind of role in each case cannot be ruled out.

Material culture in rituals could change or convey various meanings suited to the circumstances. From the previous examples, only the rituals recorded by Ibn Faḍlān and the DAI had the same purpose, ensuring the success of a business mission in foreign lands. Despite the same intent, however, they were expressed variously; animals' heads on poles are absent from the DAI, the Rus' on the Dnieper island worshipped a tree instead of the hand-made idols of the Volga Rus' and they marked the space with arrows instead of larger chunks of logs. The changes may have arisen in the circumstances of the rituals themselves. While the Rus' merchants on the Volga presumably had a safe passage, the Rus' on the Dnieper were constantly under attack by the Pechenegs. This may explain why the Rus' of the DAI used arrows for the ritual; because arrows were the most optimal weapon for warfare on the river, they probably carried them in large numbers. While not excluding the possibility that the use of arrows was related to the dangers of the trip, it is also likely that the Rus' merchants simply used the objects they had to hand for the ritual. This might have prevented them from effectively mounting animal heads on the poles (if the omission was not deliberately connected to a specific belief or worship of a deity that went unrecorded in the DAI), or they just made a practical decision of not wasting the more substantial food supplies (other than roosters) of the crews and the garrison. The oak tree also served as a convenient place for worship, making it unnecessary to carve wooden idols. The practice of erecting poles is also an example where material culture could easily be replaced or even omitted if necessary.

Although I do not believe that we should deviate far from seeing Rus' rituals rooted in an essentially Scandinavian background, the flexibility in adapting to local circumstances and customs may have been the result of similar elements among pre-Christian religions. Regarding the ritual on Saint Gregory island, for instance, the pertinent words of Obolensky that the ritual also "[tallies] with our admittedly meagre knowledge of Slavonic pagan ritual",⁶⁸⁶ have to be given some thoughts. The descriptions are truly vague enough and, therefore, unsettling in this regard. Even when more specific details are available, the comparative material is not adequately conclusive. I find it less likely, for instance, that the Rus' on the Volga or Dnieper would have erected poles (wooden logs and arrows, respectively) according to indigenous Slavic habits.⁶⁸⁷ The Slavs seem to have used spears in their sacrifices, but never did they stick them in the ground. In Thietmar's chronicle two spears are laid

⁶⁸⁶ Obolensky, "The Byzantine Sources on the Scandinavians", 158.

⁶⁸⁷ Ślupecki, "Slavic religion", 344–5.

crosswise on the ground,⁶⁸⁸ in Herbord's biography of Otto of Bamberg nine spears are laid a cubit's distance from each other and in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* the spears are used to point towards lands of interest that the Slavs planned to conquer.⁶⁸⁹ In the case of the sacrifice on Saint Gregory island, the Greek word *pégnūmi* unequivocally implies a strong 'thrust' (mainly) downward 'into' something.⁶⁹⁰ Even though the practices are in contrast, all the pertaining evidence concerns the western Slavs, so definite conclusions can be drawn.

The situation is similar with other ritual features. A polytheistic array of gods, many of whom fulfil similar roles in pagan societies,⁶⁹¹ the veneration of natural spots and the sacrifice of animals or humans are not ethno-specific features. They characterized pagan practices and beliefs in Scandinavian, Slavic and Turkic cultures as well.

For instance, strikingly, both rituals (and actually this is true for the rest two as well), were performed near water. In Scandinavian cosmology, water has always held a sacred place as a gateway between different worlds. Viking objects found in wetlands, rivers and lakes are well-known examples of putative ritual sacrifices from the Scandinavian and Western European archaeological record,⁶⁹² and archaeologists attribute the same meaning to Viking Age swords found near the Dnieper cataracts.⁶⁹³ Adam of Bremen noted that the Swedes made sacrifices at springs and the *Life of St. George of Amastris* mentions that the Rus' venerated springs.⁶⁹⁴ Venerating natural spots,

⁶⁸⁸ Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, 302. The description of the ritual is elusive. The Latin term used for placing the spears is *fixas*, which can mean 'stuck' downwards into the earth. The horses, however, are gently led over a pit covered with grass, which suggests that the horses crossed the hole through the spears.

⁶⁸⁹ Rudolf Köpke (ed.), *Herbordi Dialogus de Vita Ottonis Episcopi Babenbergensis*, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, no. 33 (Hannover: Hahn, 1868), 91; Stanislaw Sielicki, "Saxo Grammaticus on pre-Christian religion of the Slavs, The relevant fragments from book XIV of Gesta Danorum", 2015, 9. Online source: https://www.academia.edu/11345671/Saxo_Grammaticus_on_pre-Christian_religion_of_the_Slavs_the_relevant_fragments_from_book_XIV_of_Gesta_Danorum_final_draft [accessed: 23. 02. 2017.]

⁶⁹⁰ LSJ, *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, 1399. <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=1> [accessed: 30. 11. 2020]; Wilhelm Pape, *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*. Vol. 2 (Braunschweig: F. Vieweg, 1914), 608–9.

⁶⁹¹ Cross, "Primitive Civilization of the Eastern Slavs", 79; Omeljan Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus'. Old Scandinavian Sources other than the Sagas*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) 73–86; Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, 40–1.

⁶⁹² Julie Lund, "At the water's edge", in *Signals of Belief in Early England. Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited*, eds. Martin Carver, Alexandra Sanmark and Sarah Semple (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), 49–66.

⁶⁹³ Fedir Androshchuk, "Har götlandska vikingar offrat vapen i Dnepr-forsarna?" *Fornvännen* 97, no. 1 (2002): 9–14; Oleksiy Komar, "Mechi Dneprostroya (k istorii nakhodka 1928 g.)", in *Rus' v IX–XII vekakh: obshchestvo, gosudarstvo, kul'tura*, eds. N. A. Makarov and A. E. Leontiev (Moscow: Drevnosti Severa, 2014), 47–61.

⁶⁹⁴ Magister Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, no. 2 (Hannover: Hahn, 1917), 257–8; David Jenkins, Stefanos Alexopoulos, David Bachrach, Jonathan Couser, Sarah Davis, Darin Hayton and Andrea Sterk (trans.), *Life of St. George of Amastris*, Notre Dame, 2001, 18, Online source: https://library.nd.edu/byzantine_studies/documents/Amastris.pdf [accessed: 17. 02. 2017.]

however, was characteristic of most pre-Christian religions, including the old religion of the Slavs as well as steppe nomads.⁶⁹⁵

Smaller details of the rituals' locations blur the distinctive ethnic patterns further. The ritual on Saint Gregory island is unique in that it is performed at an oak tree. In Scandinavian mythology, the world tree, Yggdrasil, an *axis mundi*, holds together the different layers of the world. The tree on Saint Gregory Island might have symbolized Yggdrasil,⁶⁹⁶ although it has to be noted that the oak tree was also a place of worship in Slavic mythology as a sacred place of the thunder god Perun.⁶⁹⁷ Trees played a spiritual role in Baltic and Slavic beliefs⁶⁹⁸ and also in the religions of other eastern Turkic tribes, where they functioned in ways comparable to those in Old Norse cosmology.⁶⁹⁹

The same goes for the sacrifices. The description of rooster sacrifices at Saint Gregory is also paralleled by the siege of Dorostolon, where the Rus' plunged chickens (roosters?) into rushing water of the Danube.⁷⁰⁰ This could well have been "the ancestral custom" – as Leo Diaconus puts it – of both the Scandinavians and the Slavs. Although Thietmar of Merseburg writes that the sacrifice of roosters is a Scandinavian custom,⁷⁰¹ but based on ethnographic analogies, it may also have been a Slavic one.⁷⁰² That the Rus' on the island of Saint Gregory allowed for the possibility of eating the sacrificial animals is not unique either. Albeit reported for Scandinavians in *Hákonar saga góða* and *Guta saga*, it appears in relation to Turkic people as well, such as the instance in Ibn Faḍlān's work where he says that the Oghuz' used to eat the sacrificial horse.⁷⁰³ Based on burial customs and ethnographic parallels, this habit also was practised by the Magyars and other eastern people.⁷⁰⁴

Mounting animal heads on ritual poles is not unique to the Scandinavian sphere either. Ibn Faḍlān mentions an analogue when describing the habits of the Oghuz', who during a funeral sacrifice (sometimes hundreds of) horses and suspend their heads, legs, skins and tails on wooden pales.⁷⁰⁵

⁶⁹⁵ Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa (ed.), *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, Numen Book Series, no. 169 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 68–9, 71–2; Robert Bartlett, "From Paganism to Christianity in medieval Europe", in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60–1.

⁶⁹⁶ Simpson, *Everyday life in the Viking Age*, 176.

⁶⁹⁷ Álvarez-Pedrosa (ed.), *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, 40, 49.

⁶⁹⁸ Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, 123; Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, (London: Psychology Press, 1995), 174.

⁶⁹⁹ Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, 32–43; Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Bollingen Series, no. 76 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1964] 1972), 269–74; Mason, "The Religious Beliefs of the Khazars", 400–3; Hoppál, "Shamanism and the belief system of the Ancient Hungarians", 78.

⁷⁰⁰ Talbot and Sullivan (eds. and trans.), *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 193; original: Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 151–2.

⁷⁰¹ Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, 23–4.

⁷⁰² Izabella Wenska, "Sacrifices among the Slavs: Between Archaeological Evidence and 19th Century Folklore," *Analecta Archaeologica Ressorviensia* 10 (2015): 271–313.

⁷⁰³ *Hákonar saga Góða*, in Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*, Vol. 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenkz Fornrit, no. 28, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002), 167–8; Peel (ed.), *Guta saga*, 4–5; Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 208–9.

⁷⁰⁴ Bálint Csanád, "A ló a magyar pogány hitvilágban", *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve* 1 (1970): 31–43.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 208–9.

This ritual was well-known in the steppe world; even better documented forms of it were observed among the Türks, Khazars, Cumans, Mongols and later inhabitants along the Volga.⁷⁰⁶

The DAI reports that lots were cast about whether to sacrifice roosters (in an unspecified way), to eat them or to keep them alive. The practice of casting lots is familiar from Scandinavian tradition (*hlutkesti*, *blótspán*),⁷⁰⁷ but Thietmar also records the Slavic habit of casting lots in 1005.⁷⁰⁸ The work *Chronica Slavorum* – written around 1172 and describing some of the sacrificial habits of the Slavs – also reports that a Slavic pagan ‘priest’ also casts lots to organize the festivities dedicated to the gods.⁷⁰⁹ Thus, there were vague similarities among tenth-century pagan religions and ritual practices. Features of contemporary supernatural beliefs may have made it easier to adapt the practicalities of the different rites. Certain practices seem to have been more or less identical in the East, which have facilitated the development of mixed customs.

This comparative section meant to illustrate a couple of issues. Firstly, the two accounts of Constantine and Ibn Faḍlān are authentic descriptions documenting the same ritual in two edges of the Rus’ world. They are separated by merely 30 years, and there is absolutely no chance that they are related to each other textually. They were produced in distant cultural milieus, on different languages and concern groups far enough from each other to invite a strong case for treating the Rus’ – regardless of group differences – as sharing the same ritual traditions. Secondly, however, variations did manifest within this ritual world, a feature deriving from multiple factors. One of these is the ethno-cultural diversity of Rus’ groups, captured vividly by these accounts probably in the process of clearer ethnic formulation. Fusion of ritual elements was probably made easy by the essentially uniform nature of contemporary pre-Christian religions and ritual practices in the Scandinavian, Slavic and Turkic worlds. It seems possible that among the *austrvegr*, religious and cultural practices traditionally associated with Scandinavian, Slavic and Turkic ethnic groups manifested as fusion. As the Rus’ began to merge with the local populations of the region, new ritual traditions arose, not all of which could be classified as distinctively Scandinavian or Slavic, especially allowing for regional variations in the ritual practices and belief systems of these groups.⁷¹⁰ Certain practices of pagan Rus’

⁷⁰⁶ John Andrew Boyle, “A form of horse sacrifice amongst the 13th–14th century Mongols”, *Central Asiatic Journal* 10, no. 3/4 (1965): 145–50; Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 244–5; Ecsedy, “Ancient Türk (T’u-Chüeh)”, 280.

⁷⁰⁷ Peter Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings. AD 700–1100* (London: Methuen, 1982), 54; Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 48–9; Bray, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Ideology”, 126; Terry Gunnell, “Ansgar’s conversion of Iceland”, *Scripta Islandica* 60 (2009): 108–14.

⁷⁰⁸ Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, 302–3.

⁷⁰⁹ Johann Martin Lappenberg (ed.), *Helmoldi presbyteri chronica Slavorum*, MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, no. 7 (Hannover: Hahn, 1868), 52.

⁷¹⁰ For local variations, see: Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1999); Stefan Brink, “How uniform was the Old Norse religion?”, in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, eds. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 105–36; Andreas Nordberg, “Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion”, in *More than Mythology. Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press 2012), 119–51;

rituals originally stemmed from Scandinavian traditions, but could have been modified, merged or distorted over time, giving rise to eclectic performances. Such an instance is portrayed in the PVL when the Rus' entered into a contract and took oaths upon their weapons, a well-known Scandinavian tradition,⁷¹¹ although at the same time they apparently pledged allegiance to Slavic gods – Perun and Volos.⁷¹² Heterogeneity can also be explained by multifunctional ritual elements even within the same cultural milieu, and by largely practical decisions. The latter could be prompted by alternative resources available, or sometimes even necessitated by the environment to perform a ritual. Even rituals with the very same purpose could be conducted in many ways, and practices carried multiple meanings. The flexible nature of ritual practice probably facilitated adaptation. Perhaps in the light of this it will not be astonishing to see cultural traits from the Turkic steppe cultures infiltrating the Rus' ritual world.

Changing beliefs?

Eastern, Turkic influence on the ritual traditions of the Rus' is discernible on a practical and probably a spiritual level. However, a broad definition of 'eastern' influence should be applied. 'Turkic' is a dangerously broad term in a religious sense, as steppe tribes could have been just as different from each other as they were from the peoples of the north or the various Rus' groups operating in the area. Jean-Paul Roux compiled the only comprehensive treatment of Turkic (Altaic) religions by collecting sources from a vast area across a long time span.⁷¹³ Unity over such a vast territory can only be accepted in general terms, even more because Turkic-speaking groups were in contact with a diverse range of other or similar religions and thus subject to change. In some cases, this might have made them more familiar with neighbouring cultures than with their linguistic relatives on the other edge of Eurasia. In addition, Turkic cultures were exposed to Muslim (the Volga Bulgars, Bashkirs, Oghuz') and, in certain cases, Jewish (the Khazars) or Orthodox-Byzantine (the Danube Bulgars, Pechenegs) influences that might have resulted in religious syncretism.

Leszek Slupecki, "Slavic religion", in *The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*, ed. Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen, Olav Hammer and David A. Warburton (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 339–58.

⁷¹¹ Martina Stein-Wilkeshuis, "Scandinavians swearing oaths in tenth-century Russia: Pagans and Christians", *Journal of Medieval History* 28 (2002): 155–68.

⁷¹² PVL 17, 26; Cf. Cross claims that the Scandinavian retainers swore on Perun and the Slavs on Volos. It is also possible that the later chronicler replaced the names of the Scandinavian gods Óðinn and Þórr with the pagan Slavic deities of Perun and Volos, which were known to him. Samuel Hazzard Cross, "Primitive Civilization of the Eastern Slavs." *The American Slavic and East European Review* 5, no. 1 (1946): 81. In light of the previous discussion, however, I do not think that this sentence should be interpreted differently than what it says explicitly: pledging oaths to Slavic gods according to Scandinavian customs.

⁷¹³ Jean-Paul Roux, *La Mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1963); Jean-Paul Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols* (Paris: Payot, 1984).

Also, Turkic societies were often divided into lower and upper strata that were usually linked to different religious beliefs. In the Khazar Khaganate, for instance, most of the original population practised a Turkic religion akin to that of the Oghuz', even after the Khazar elite converted to Judaism. Additionally, Muslim ethno-religious components were present in the khaganate. Traditional Turkic cultures practised a form of shamanism; shamans, a designated religious elite in tribal communities, conducted religious rites.⁷¹⁴ This differed from the sky-god religious system called Tengrism, the prevalent belief system in the steppe, which characterized more stratified societies with a developed hierarchy of a sole ruler, usually the khagan.⁷¹⁵ Besides the Oghuz' and Khazars, some form of shamanism and/or Tengrism was practised by the Magyars, Pechenegs and Bashkirs.⁷¹⁶ Religion was also a political factor in steppe societies, sometimes unaffected by the beliefs in the larger social unit. The Eastern European wooded-steppe and steppe at this time was a cultural melting pot, thus clear analogies to the practices of specific tribes are hard to discern. The following discussion, however, will discuss tendencies of cultural transfer that may have resulted from Scandinavian Rus'–steppe contacts.

Burial customs between the Rus' and the Turkic people show some similarities. Ibn Faḍlān's account provides a description of the burial of the Rus' chieftain on a ship after the cremation. The burying community "built a structure like a round hillock over the beached boat, and placed a large piece of *khadhank* in the middle. They wrote the man's name and the name of the King of the Rūsīyah on it".⁷¹⁷ Neil Price suggests, on the analogy of this passage, that it is likely that Scandinavian burials also included carved wooden posts.⁷¹⁸ These would leave little trace in the archaeological record but might account for some post holes found in barrows. Individual standing stones (*bautastenar*) were also erected on single graves in Scandinavia.⁷¹⁹ In the Turkic world, a specific form of erecting memorial stones on mounds involved the *balbal*, representing enemies killed.⁷²⁰ A connected funerary custom of sticking weapons (mostly spears) vertically into the grave also occurred in both

⁷¹⁴ Åke Hulkrantz, "A Definition of Shamanism", *Temenos* 9 (1973): 25–37.

⁷¹⁵ András Róna-Tas, "Materialien zur alten Religion der Türken", in *Synkretismus in den Religionen Zentralasiens*, eds. Walther Heissig and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), 33–45; Jean-Paul Roux, "Tengri", in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Vol. 13, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 9080–2; Jean-Paul Roux, "Turkic Religions", in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Vol. 14, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 397–404.

⁷¹⁶ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples. Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 263, 268–9; Richard A. E. Mason, "The Religious Beliefs of the Khazars", *The Ukrainian Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1995): 383–415; Mihály Hoppál, "Shamanism and the belief system of the Ancient Hungarians", in Mihály Hoppál: *Shamans and Traditions* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2007), 77–81; Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 202–3, 214–5.

⁷¹⁷ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 252–3.

⁷¹⁸ Neil Price, "Dying and the dead. Viking Age mortuary behaviour", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 261.

⁷¹⁹ Price, "Dying and the dead", 261.

⁷²⁰ Roux, *La Mort chez les peuples altaïques*, 186–8; Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 260–1; Ecsedy, "Ancient Türk (T'u-Chüeh), 280.

milieus. In Scandinavia, this might have conveyed something different than commemorating the name of the deceased; it was a post-mortem ritual killing that secured an afterlife place suitable for a warrior.⁷²¹ Stabbing spears into a tomb, presumably with a flag on them, was also common among the Bulgars of the Volga and, judging by the archaeological evidence and ethnographical parallels, it is likely that the Magyars also followed the same custom at funerals.⁷²² Thus, wooden and stone commemorative structures, even weapons, on top of grave mounds showed concern for the posthumous legacy of the deceased in both cultural contexts.

Additional details can be added to Ibn Faḍlān's eyewitness description of the funeral ritual of an eminent Rus' chieftain. According to his report, after the chieftain died, his body was kept in a tent for ten days while fitting funerary garments were prepared and the mourners engaged in heavy drinking and sexual orgies. Then the Rus' mourners fill a boat with valuables – treasure, weapons, jewellery, food and drink – and sacrifice animals (horses, cows, a dog, a rooster and a hen) together with a slave girl who volunteered to follow her master to a place known as *al-jannah*, that is, 'Paradise' or 'Garden'. The girl is raped by the followers or relatives of the chieftain and, after being lifted up in a doorframe multiple times, she recites a text about the reunion of family members in the afterlife. Finally, she is stabbed by a woman called the 'angel of death' (*malak al-mawt*). After loading the ship with possessions, gifts, sacrificial animals and the girl's body, the Rus' burn the boat, drag the remains to the shore and construct a tumulus on top of it.⁷²³

Although most researchers regard this as Nordic in essence, based on food and animal offerings, boat burning and clear parallels with Nordic texts and the archaeological material.⁷²⁴ Ritual details exactly matching a Scandinavian context have been recently also noted by Neil Price, such as what concerns a phallic ritual, in which a woman is lifted up across a door-frame as preserved in *Völsa þáttr* and the Faroese *drunnur* folklore tradition.⁷²⁵ However, it has long been acknowledged that some of the details of the ritual do not correspond with any known Scandinavian examples or are not fully compatible with them and that parallels should be sought in a Volga Turk cultural milieu.⁷²⁶ These include accessories and materials used and customs observed during the ritual. Most recently,

⁷²¹ Andreas Nordberg, "Vertikalt placerade vapen i vikingatida gravar", *Fornvännen* 97 (2002): 15–24.

⁷²² László Kovács, "A honfoglaló magyarok lándzsái és lándzsástemetkezésük", *Alba Regia* 11 (1970): 81–108.

⁷²³ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–53.

⁷²⁴ Morten Lund Warminde, "Ibn Fadlan in the Context of his Age", in *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia. Papers from an International Research Seminar at the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, 5th-7th May 1994*, eds. Ole-Crumlin Pedersen and Birgitte Munch Thye (Copenhagen: PNM, 1995), 131–5; Timothy Taylor, *The buried soul. How humans invented death* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), 170–92; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 138; Schjødt, "Ibn Fadlan's account of a Rus funeral".

⁷²⁵ Neil Price, "Ibn Fadlan and the rituals of the Rus: Vikings on the Volga?", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. Jonathan Shepard and Luke Treadwell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 177–97.

⁷²⁶ Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: A Survey of the Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 408; Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah", 23; Montgomery, "Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources", 163; Hraundal, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus".

Thorir Jonsson Hraundal called attention to these features, including the balsamic leaves used to embalm the corpse of the Rus' chief, his funerary garments embellished with buttons and his silk shirt, as none of these materials were available in Scandinavia at the time. In addition, other actions during the rituals, such as forcing (sacrificial) horses to run to total exhaustion, are also analogous to Turkic practices.⁷²⁷ The long funerals of early Türk khagans were identical in their treatment of horses, and the custom survived at least up until the time of the later Mongols.⁷²⁸ The spiritual role of ritual specialists in Rus' culture is also used by Hraundal to support his thesis.⁷²⁹ Ibn Rusta noted that the Rus' had their own special 'healing men' called *aṭibbā'* (sing. *ṭabīb*), who served a function comparable to that of the shamans of the steppe, ordering sacrifices of men and women as well as horses to the gods.⁷³⁰

Besides these practicalities, religious ideas attesting possible eastern influence are also discernible in the account. Correlating the Rus' eschatological notions described by Ibn Faḍlān with Scandinavian beliefs is quite problematic, and it must be stressed that Scandinavian afterlife beliefs were in no way uniform. The dead could reach various afterlife destinations – such as Fólkvangr, Valhöll, Hel, the abode of the goddess Rán or a simple mound – in a variety of ways.⁷³¹ Nevertheless, *al-jannah*, “a beautiful and darkgreen”⁷³² place where the slave girl follows her master, cannot be associated with any known Scandinavian examples.

Ibn Faḍlān's 'Paradise', of course, could be regarded as just another example of the multitude of flexible beliefs in Scandinavian thought, but it is more likely to reflect his own understanding of the afterlife. Islamic authors often adjusted their experience of 'foreign otherness' to their knowledge of Islamic cultural concepts and Ibn Faḍlān is no exception in this regard. His description of the Rus' afterlife stems from an Islamic idea of 'Paradise': the Quran tells of *al-jannah* also as of an ever-green beautiful place (55:64) once.⁷³³ The slave girl's vision of joining her former kin and master in 'Paradise' (I see my father and mother . . . all my dead kindred . . . [and] my master seated in the Garden")⁷³⁴ is not a solitary view of Ibn Faḍlān on Rus' afterlife notions as it is reinforced by Mas'ūdī, who also states that the custom of the *suttee* among the Rus' is driven by the wives' expectations to reunite with their husband in the afterlife.⁷³⁵ One wonders how much of these derived from the

⁷²⁷ Hraundal, “New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus”, 85–9.

⁷²⁸ Roux, *La Mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux*, 151, 159–60, 166.

⁷²⁹ Hraundal, “New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus”, 89.

⁷³⁰ BGA I–7, 129.

⁷³¹ Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *The Road to Hel. A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 65–98; Rudolf Simek, “Totenreiche”, in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Vol. 31, eds. Heinrich Beck, Dieter Geuenich and Heiko Steuer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 89–92; Schjødt, “Ibn Fadlan's account of a Rus funeral”, 276–87.

⁷³² Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 248–9.

⁷³³ *Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Damascus: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 2003), 533.

⁷³⁴ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 248–9.

⁷³⁵ Maḥūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 9.

Quranic notion of wives being “purified” when joining their husbands in Paradise, and people blessedly enjoying the company of their forefathers, spouses and children.⁷³⁶

But there were parallels in the steppe world too. It has to be accentuated that whatever we know of Turkic notions of the otherworld are from outsiders and that monotheistic religions (like Islam) probably influenced these pagan religious beliefs.⁷³⁷ For instance, leaving the earthly world for ‘Paradise’ was an expression in medieval Turkic languages, and some of the descriptions of a heavenly place mention flocks that multiply and are herded in endless pastures.⁷³⁸ The expectations of the slave girl of re-uniting with her family and household in the afterlife in the otherworld also match beliefs of the Turkic-speaking Altaic world.⁷³⁹ *Al-jannah*, in addition, features in Ibn Faḍlān’s work prior to his depiction of the Rus’, where he paints a similar picture of the Oghuz Turk views. If Oghuz chiefs’ souls are hindered on their journey to the otherworld after their burial, a post-mortem sacrifice of horses might be made. This aids the deceased in catching up with his companions who passed before, relieving him from feeling alone. The slave girl’s visionary testimony tells that the Rus’ master, similarly to the Oghuz chiefs, rested in ‘Paradise’ among his male servants or retainers (*ghilmān*).⁷⁴⁰ The similarity of the Oghuz customs to those of the Rus’ is further attested in the same passage. The Oghuz’ place sick people in tents and leave them there, strikingly akin to the story of the Rus’ chieftain who is left to rot in his tent for ten days.⁷⁴¹

Further evidence supports the hypothesis of steppe influences on Rus’ afterlife notions, and it is apparent that these were by no means confined to the Volga area. The Dnieper region was home to other steppe tribes, such as the Pechenegs and the Magyars, both of whom seem to have had considerable contact with the Rus’ in the ninth and tenth centuries. A second account, that of the Byzantine Leo Diaconus strengthens the previous argument on the afterlife beliefs of the Rus’. He based his own account of the ritual on a report by an eyewitness.⁷⁴² The ritual took place during the Byzantine siege of the Bulgarian city of Dorostolon, where Sviatoslav retreated with his remaining army of Slavs and Scandinavians in 971 after being abandoned by their steppe nomadic allies, the Magyars and Pechenegs. After clearing the ethnographic and classical *topoi* of Byzantine literature

⁷³⁶ Louis Gardet, “*Djanna*”, in *El²*, Vol. 2, eds. B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 447–52; Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 44–5; Nerina Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 85–8.

⁷³⁷ Although these issues are not explicitly discussed, the wider context is illuminating in this regard in Peter Golden’s study on Kipchak pre-Christian religion: Peter B. Golden, “Religion among the Qipčaps of Medieval Eurasia”, *Central Asiatic Journal* 42, no. 2 (1998): 180, 213–4, 223–6, 237.

⁷³⁸ Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 257–8.

⁷³⁹ Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 273–4; Hilda Ecsedy, “Ancient Türk (T’u-Chüeh) Burial Customs”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 38, no. 3 (1984): 275; Hraundal, “New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus”, 86.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 248–9.

⁷⁴¹ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 208–9.

⁷⁴² Anthony Kaldellis, “The original source for Tzimiskes’ Balkan campaign (971 AD) and the emperor’s classicizing propaganda”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 35–52.

from the text, the description of Rus' customs is distinct enough to be regarded as authentic.⁷⁴³ According to Leo Diaconus, the Rus', whom Leo calls "Tauroscythians" according to Byzantine historical traditions, made sacrifices during the siege:

"When night fell, since the moon was nearly full, they [the Tauroscythians] came out on the plain and searched for their dead; and they collected them in front of the city and kindled numerous fires and burned them, after slaughtering on top of them many captives, both men and women, in accordance with their ancestral custom. And they made sacrificial offerings by drowning suckling infants and chickens in the Istros, plunging them into rushing waters of the river."⁷⁴⁴

One specific detail can help to locate a steppe cultural trait in this ritual besides the Slavic and/or Scandinavian features of these sacrifices, such as the riverbank location, and the cremation of humans and animals. The account goes against the usual Rus' custom whereby the victims are not said to be forced into participating. Although how 'willingly' servants and widows went to death is questionable in a psychological sense,⁷⁴⁵ the underlying cultural norms governing this practice clearly expected these victims to *appear* to be volunteers. The sacrifice of prisoners, on the other hand, suggests a spiritually different purpose. It was rare for the victims of Scandinavian human sacrifices to be captives.⁷⁴⁶ The best-known exception and only contemporary record is the sacrifice of 111 Frankish prisoners on the banks of the Seine.⁷⁴⁷ The few other known examples are always connected with votive offerings to the gods, most notably Óðinn, or come from histories of the early Germanic tribes of the Migration Period. The events along the Seine must have had some spiritual purpose, as the number 111 is hardly accidental if a Christian hagiographic source is to be believed. It might equally have the intention of frightening the enemies on the other bank of the river.⁷⁴⁸ This could have played a part at Dorostolon as well, although there the sacrifices occurred as grave offerings to dead

⁷⁴³ Anthony Kaldellis, *Ethnography after Antiquity. Foreign Lands and People in Byzantine Literature* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 102–5.

⁷⁴⁴ Talbot and Sullivan (eds. and trans.), *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 193; original: Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 151–2.

⁷⁴⁵ Taylor, *The buried soul*, 96–108, 128–34.

⁷⁴⁶ Simpson, *Everyday life in the Viking Age*, 185–6; Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium*, 50–9; Anders Hultgård, "Menschenopfer", in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Vol. 9, ed. Heinrich Beck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 533–46; Daniel Bray, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Ideology in Old Norse Religion", in *The dark side. Proceedings of the Seventh Australian and International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference*, eds. Christopher Hartney and Andrew McGarrity (Sydney: RLA Press, 2004), 123–35; Klas Edholm, "Människooffer i fornnordisk religion. En diskussion utifrån arkeologiskt material och källtexter", *Chaos* 65 (2016): 125–47.

⁷⁴⁷ Charles de Smedt, Guillaume van Hooff, and Joseph de Backer (eds.), *Translatio S. Germani Parisiensis anno 846, secundum primævam narrationem*, in *Analecta Bollandiana*, Vol. 2 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1883), 78.

⁷⁴⁸ Edholm, *Människooffer i myt och minne*, 222–6.

comrades. The strong care for fallen comrades is emphasized again when the commander Ikmor (ON. Yngvarr) is grieved by his men after he falls in battle.⁷⁴⁹

The parallels of connected beliefs and practices of sacrificing enemy captives during funerals are documented among steppe people through centuries and clearly represent a continuum of tradition. The Byzantine Theophanes, for instance, recorded about the Khazars in 710/711 that after the death of one of their eminent magistrates, the *tudun*, the Khazars sacrificed 300 enemy prisoners to serve the *tudun* as retainers in the afterlife.⁷⁵⁰ A peculiar variation of this custom is known to have been practised by another contemporary of the Rus', namely the Oghuz', and was briefly alluded to earlier. When their chiefs died, the Oghuz' symbolically replaced the dead lord's afterlife retainers. Ibn Faḍlān says: "If he has shown great bravery and killed someone, they carve wooden images, as many as the men he has killed, place them on top of his grave and say: "His retainers (*ghilmānahu*) who serve him in the Garden".⁷⁵¹ These memorial stones or carvings called *balbal* were erected on graves, mainly in the territory of the early Türks.⁷⁵² In addition, besides the Türks, Khazars and Oghuz', a belief that defeated enemies served them in the afterlife was also recorded among other steppe tribes, such as the Magyars, the Mongols and the Tatars.⁷⁵³ It even survived until the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries among people with a nomadic background: in two instances the performance of human sacrifice of enemy captives for dead rulers was noted about the Ottomans in two reliable sources.⁷⁵⁴ I suggest that the sacrifices during the siege of Dorostolon should be interpreted in this way, namely, that the Rus' sacrificed hostages to avenge their fallen warriors and force the enemies to serve them in the afterlife. Leo Diaconus himself supports this in a later passage:

"This also is said about the Tauroscythians, that never up until now had they surrendered to the enemy when defeated; but when they lose hope of safety, they drive their swords into their vital parts, and thus kill themselves. And they do this because of the following belief: they say that if they are killed in battle by the enemy, then after their death and the separation of their souls from their bodies they will serve their slayers in Hades. And the Tauroscythians dread such servitude, and, hating to wait upon those who have killed

⁷⁴⁹ Hans Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, CFHB Series Berolinensis, no. 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973), 305.

⁷⁵⁰ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, Vol. 1, ed. Karl de Boor (Leipzig: B.G. Teubneri, 1883), 378–9.

⁷⁵¹ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 208–9.

⁷⁵² Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols*, 260–1.

⁷⁵³ Gyula Moravcsik, "Zum Bericht des Leon Diakonos über den Glauben an die Dienstleistung im Jenseits", *Studia Antiqua. Antonio Salač septuagenario oblate* (1955): 74–6; Ecsedy, "Ancient Türk (T'u-Chüeh)".

⁷⁵⁴ Speros Vryonis Jr., "Evidence on human sacrifice among the Early Ottoman Turks", *Journal of Asian History* 5, no. 2 (1971): 140–6.

them, inflict death upon themselves with their own hands. Such is the belief that prevails among them.”⁷⁵⁵

Leo himself admits that what he reports is conjecture (it is only “said about the Tauroscythians”), and it has been argued that he is in fact mistaken in attributing this habit to the Rus’ instead of to Sviatoslav’s nomadic allies.⁷⁵⁶ These allies, however, had already deserted Sviatoslav by this stage of the campaign, and the situation is more plausibly connected to a nomadic influence on the Rus’. If Leo’s report was groundless hearsay, it must have been persistent and widespread since unrelated commentators note similar behaviour among the Rus’ in an identical situation. The Persian historian Miskawayh reports this incident for the Muslim siege of Bardha’ah:

“Thus there was a story current in the region which I heard from many persons how five Russians were assembled in a garden in Bardha’ah, one of them a beardless lad of fair countenance, the son of one of their chieftains with some captive women. When the Moslems knew of their presence, they surrounded the garden, and a large number of Dailemite and other troops came together to fight these five. They tried hard to get a single prisoner out of the number, but it was not possible, for none of them would capitulate, and they could not be killed before they had slain many times their number of the Moslems. The beardless lad was the last survivor. When he perceived that he was going to be captured, he mounted a tree that was near him, and kept slashing away at his vital parts with his scimitar till he fell dead.”⁷⁵⁷

Even though Miskawayh does not give an explanation of the underlying beliefs of such behaviour, the incident is strikingly compatible with Leo’s (and will be argued also Ibn Faḍlān’s) learned experience of Rus’ beliefs in the afterlife. This passage has been also interpreted in a Scandinavian cultural framework as the motif of the ‘last survivor’, mostly known from sources dealing with the early Germanic tribes of the Migration Period.⁷⁵⁸ All five Rus’ warriors, however, were said to behave according to the same belief: avoiding captivity at all cost. In addition, Miskawayh and Leo are near contemporary to each other, describe the very same people (the Rus’), and it feels more natural to draw a connection between them rather than with sources related more distantly. Leo and Miskawayh also show that suicide was not completely alien from warrior life among the Rus’. This also aligns

⁷⁵⁵ Talbot and (eds. and trans.), *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 195; original: Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 151–2.

⁷⁵⁶ Tarras, “Leo Diaconus and the Ethnology of Kievan Rus”, 401.

⁷⁵⁷ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 5, 73–4; original: Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 66–7.

⁷⁵⁸ Edholm, *Människooffer i myt och minne*, 214–22.

with another of Ibn Faḍlān's information, to be scrutinized in the next chapter, on allowing Rus' retainers to be killed for their king and chieftain (*Map 4*). As will be shown in the next chapter, that practice also shows the most clear parallels with customs from the steppes.

Final remarks

Turkic cultural impacts on the Rus' were significant and triggered changes in the latter's identity. In the mid-tenth century, Scandinavian analogues of certain features of pagan Rus' rituals could still be discerned. Choosing lake shores or riverbanks for rituals, holy trees, human and animal sacrifices (especially roosters), using weapons among other grave goods all suggest that the Scandinavians had not yet been fully assimilated into the eastern environment in the tenth century. Although these elements were similar to Slav practices, contextual evidence hints that a decisive number of the participants in these rituals came from Scandinavian ethno-religious backgrounds. Ritual practices evidently changed, giving rise to parallel variations of rites and concepts practised (perhaps universally) in the steppe and the forest-steppe belts by other ethnic groups.

The shared features and striking similarities among contemporary pagan religions helped the Rus' adapt mentally to specific rites and beliefs. In the case of the Slavs, long co-habitation facilitated the merging of cultures on a religious level, although the continuing interaction between the Rus' and steppe tribes also seems to have influenced Rus' rituals. The Rus' were pragmatic people who not only embraced new perspectives but also adopted local fashions and replaced their own objects with local material culture, especially when necessitated by circumstances. Such flexibility in managing objects in a ritual context definitely supported the development of varied practices.

Syncretism among Old Norse, Slavic and Turkic religions seems to have worked well due to some shared beliefs and common customs present in all three cultures. Since regional variations existed in all three belief systems, it is impossible to assert with certainty which variations affected the others; however, it seems likely that it was mostly Old Norse religious views that were influenced by Turkic beliefs. I am not aware of any evidence to the contrary so far. Although the Scandinavians were the ones who had to adapt to the local environments, the lack of Scandinavian impact on steppe people (clearly to a lesser extent) might be attributable to the dearth of sources about the period. It is equally hard to measure how widespread Turkic practices and beliefs were among the pagan Rus' and in the steppe in general. In terms of steppe cultural features, evidence suggests that Rus' groups active along the Dnieper and Volga adapted certain practices connected to beliefs and borrowed everyday cultural behaviours. The impacts on the Scandinavians can partly be ascribed to the natural environment, which required flexibility in external appearance and in using alternative resources in ritual contexts.

The Rus's relatively quick adaptation to foreign, especially Turkic, customs can also be explained by another inference. Scandinavians sailing eastwards had already encountered nomadic people in Scandinavia, the Sámi, who performed rituals similar to those of the nomadic tribes in the East.⁷⁵⁹ Sámi shamanistic rituals and magic seem to have had considerable impact on Old Norse religion, and knowledge of Sámi culture among the Scandinavians must have been widespread.⁷⁶⁰ The Sámi originally occupied the northern parts of present-day Finland, Sweden and the northern and southern parts of Norway. Scandinavians operating in the East also came mostly from these areas, which raises the likelihood that they had personally met Sámi people earlier. Moreover, the Sámi were frequent characters in late medieval Icelandic sagas, which means that besides those with direct experience others could also have been familiar with shamanistic customs, making it less strange for the Scandinavians to meet people with similar practices.⁷⁶¹

Perhaps this was why other religions of the Volga region, such as Islam, which was also followed by some Turkic people such as the Volga Bulgars, did not make a stronger impression on the Rus'. Vladimir, for instance, received Muslim envoys at his court in order to get acquainted with Islam but finally refused to embrace the faith due to its restrictions on consuming alcohol.⁷⁶² Abandoning the consumption of pork was also impossible for the Rus', as reported by a version of Ibn Faḍlān's *Kitāb* preserved by Amīn Rāzī, who claims that even those Rus' who converted to Islam could not refrain from eating it.⁷⁶³ As Egil Mikkelsen notes, Islam's rules were incompatible with Old Norse religious views and practices. The Rus' custom of depicting idols for religious ceremonies would definitely go against Islam's prohibitions on drawing faces. Similarly, the lack of hygiene and the libertine sexual customs of the Rus' (e.g. sexual intercourse with slave girls in public) would have been unacceptable for Muslims, for whom regular bathing was a daily practice with religious overtones and sexuality was a private matter. Old Norse funerary rites went against the Islamic notions as well. The Rus' told Ibn Faḍlān during the funeral he described that the Arabs are fools to leave the body for the worms in the ground rather than burning it as the Rus' do.⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁵⁹ Eliade, *Shamanism*, 379–87; Åke Hultrantz, "Aspects of Saami (Lapp) Shamanism", in *Northern Religions and Shamanism*, eds. Mihály Hoppál and Juha Pentikäinen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1992), 138–46; Hermann Pálsson, "The Sami people in Old Norse Literature", *Nordlit Arbeidstidsskrift i Litteratur* 5 (1999): 29–53; Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen (eds.), *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 92–3.

⁷⁶⁰ Else Mundal, "Coexistence of Saami and Norse Culture – Reflected in and Interpreted by Old Norse Myths", in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society. Papers of the 11th International Saga Conference 2–7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, eds. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, 2000), 346–55; Neil Price, *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, PhD dissertation (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2002), 233–329.

⁷⁶¹ Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium*, 283–300.

⁷⁶² PVL 39.

⁷⁶³ Stig Wikander, *Araber, Vikingar, Väringar* (Lund: Svenska Humanistiska Förbundet, 1978), 73.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 252–3.

This practical side of the Scandinavian/Rus'–Turkic relationship went hand in hand with changes in belief. Aspects connected to eschatology in Rus' beliefs are not always paralleled in Scandinavian sources. Two of these aspects should be highlighted. First, it seems especially important at whose hands a warrior was to die, as this influenced his afterlife service bound to a ruler who could also be the enemy. This might occasionally have prompted Rus' warriors to commit suicide in order to avoid serving an enemy. Second, the belief in the afterlife reuniting of households (families, servants, retainers), are known in the related belief systems of the steppe people. Although this might reflect Islamic notions on part of the observers, the history of the steppe world provides parallels in a clear continuum of customs and beliefs characteristic for people of a similar lifestyle and a shared cultural background across Central Asia and the steppes for centuries. Taken together with the evidence for changes in external expression in the Rus' communities described by Ibn Faḍlān and Leo Diaconus, it is likely that eschatological views from the steppe blended into Rus' culture. Although the exact paths and times of cultural transfers remain unidentifiable, the most likely transmitters of such customs would have been those who descended from the Türk Khaganate, the Oghuz' and the Khazars, for instance, although influence could come from further as well. As briefly noted, the Rus' custom of running horses until total exhaustion during funerals matches Chinese records of the burial of early Türk rulers, a reminder of the persistent survival of similar customs even in the post-Türk world. Taken together with the other details of Rus' external appearance and ritual practices reminiscent of the steppes, it is attractive to suggest that aspects of Rus' afterlife beliefs resulted from steppe contacts. Eschatological views, especially fate in the afterlife might have been influenced by notions learned from a variety of steppe people in the region. Warriors, post-mortem serving enemies in the afterlife, is one such possible idea shining through our fragmented evidence. As will be seen in the next chapter, servitude, in a variety forms, concerned the Viking Age Rus' more frequently than accentuated before, and no wonder it occupied their thoughts and visions. Servitude in the afterlife was a key issue and could equally concern enemy as well as one's own rulers.

Chapter 6

Slave soldiers

The popular imagination and scholarly discourse are both usually occupied with the vikings as the takers of captives and enslavers of men and women in insular Europe and beyond. Although this view holds to some extent, the practice of raiding, pillaging and taking captives from enemies was regarded as ‘norms’ in warfare everywhere in Europe during the Viking Age.⁷⁶⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising that vikings were sometimes also taken as captives and were enslaved. Besides enslaving each other on a regular basis, Scandinavians were also captured by those whose territory they invaded or on whose territory they settled. For instance, during the tenth-eleventh-century wars between Irish petty kings and Scandinavian warlords, vikings were often overpowered, after which many of their comrades fell into the hands of the revengeful Irish, who likely sold them as slaves.⁷⁶⁶

The eastern viking sphere shows a similar pattern. Various written sources report that during the latter parts of the Viking Age the Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and Baltic populations of the East were dominated by a Scandinavian, later Rus’ elite.⁷⁶⁷ The resulting slave trade and other trading activities (in furs, swords, etc.), have yielded thousands of Muslim dirham coin finds both in the East and in Scandinavia, drawing attention to the extensive network, and contemporary relevance of such trade, while also emphasising the Scandinavians’ role as traders of slaves and other goods, within it. These phenomena are at the forefront of recent scholarly inquiries: slaves, as argued, must be the ‘invisible commodity’ behind such great flow of portable wealth.⁷⁶⁸ It also links the topic to the nature of Scandinavian slavery, which has a longer research history.⁷⁶⁹

Systematically or otherwise, however, none of these studies called attention to written sources indicating that groups containing Scandinavians, most notably the Rus’, were subject to captivity and became enslaved by various peoples in the East: including Byzantines, Muslims and various tribes of the steppe, for instance the Magyars, Pechenegs and Khazars. This chapter will examine Scandinavian

⁷⁶⁵ Gareth Williams, “Raiding and warfare”, in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 196.

⁷⁶⁶ Paul Holm, “The slave trade of Dublin, ninth to twelfth centuries”, *Peritia* 5 (1986): 329, 336–8.

⁷⁶⁷ PVL 14, 21, 26–9, 31; DAI 60–3; BGA I–7, 145–6; BGA I–6, 155; Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 242–3; and the continuators of the Jayhānī tradition: Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters”, 167; Göckenjan and Zimonyi (eds.), *Orientalische Berichte*, 234.

⁷⁶⁸ Felix Biermann and Marek Jankowiak (eds.), *The Archaeology of Slavery in Early Medieval Northern Europe. The Invisible Commodity* (Cham: Springer, 2021); see also note 84.

⁷⁶⁹ Mazo Ruth Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Tore Iversen, *Trelldommen. Norsk slaveri i middelalderen* (Bergen: Historisk Institutt, 1997); Thomas Lindkvist and Janken Myrda (eds.), *Trälar. Ofria i agrarsamhället från vikingatid till medeltid* (Nordiska museets förlag, Stockholm, 2003); Stefan Brink, “Slavery in the Viking Age”, in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 49–55; Stefan Brink, *Vikingarnas slavar. Den nordiska trälldomen under yngre järnålder och äldsta medeltid* (Riga: Atlantis, 2012); David Wyatt, “Slavery in Northern Europe (Scandinavia and Iceland), and the British Isles, 500–1420”, in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Vol. 2: AD 500–AD 1420, eds. Craig Perry, David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman and David Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 482–507.

and Rus' captivity and slavery in these areas, based on contemporary Byzantine and Muslim accounts supplemented with evidence from Old Slavic, and Old Norse retrospective sources. I have gathered all contemporary material that deals with issues related to Viking Age captured Scandinavians, while in the case of retrospective sources the investigation was restricted to specific episodes.

My first aim is to critically review the entire corpus to identify captive Scandinavians in the East, most importantly Rus'. Throughout the review, I will explore the wide variety of fates that these captives were subject to, as well as contemporary attitudes towards captives and captivity.

From the outset, it is necessary to attempt to briefly clarify the relationship between captivity and slavery. It is beyond controversy that warfare was one of the main sources of slaves, and that slavers were active both in the western and eastern Viking world.⁷⁷⁰ However, it has also been acknowledged that captivity and slavery are not synonyms even if they are difficult to distinguish in most cases.⁷⁷¹ Not all captives ended up as slaves, some were massacred on site, while others were ransomed, exchanged for other prisoners, reduced to temporary field work, simply released, or – as this chapter will show – impressed into the victor's army.⁷⁷² Contrary to the transient state of captivity, slavery meant a permanent alienation from natal kin, and loss of previous status, becoming 'socially dead' as famously phrased in Orlando Patterson's seminal work on the subject.⁷⁷³

That said, due to a wide variety of slave conditions, boundaries between free and unfree are often obscure in the sources, especially when compared to other statuses of dependence. The extensive semantic slave terminology in Scandinavian Viking Age-related sources allows for a distinction between different types of slaves. Relative to other subordinate people some were held in high esteem due to their expertise, or their specific duties, sometimes even in comparison to those who were regarded as legally free.⁷⁷⁴

This leads on to my second aim, an investigation of the living conditions of the captives forced into military slavery. This term is mainly employed by scholars in a Muslim context, referring to warriors abducted – or traded – from other societies and forced to serve as professional soldiers in Muslim states from the ninth century onwards. These 'slave soldiers' should be seen as a separate category from other slaves occasionally taking arms in conflicts.⁷⁷⁵ The main focus here will be how

⁷⁷⁰ Fontaine, *Slave Trading in the British Isles and the Czech Lands*, 106–10.

⁷⁷¹ Catherine M. Cameron, *Captives. How Stolen People Changed the World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 2–10; McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 744–7; for Scandinavia: Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 15; Iversen, *Trelldommen*, 87–94; cf. Brink, *Vikingarnas slavar*, 85–91.

⁷⁷² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 106–9.

⁷⁷³ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 38–45.

⁷⁷⁴ Brink, *Vikingarnas slavar*, 19–36, 121–68; Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 5–39; Iversen, *Trelldommen*, 27–30.

⁷⁷⁵ Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses. The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 74–81; Daniel Pipes, *Slave soldiers and Islam. The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 5–23; Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates. The Islamic Near East from the sixth to the eleventh*

to describe the status of these so-called ‘slave soldiers’ in relation to other military positions that were – perhaps – no less subordinate in nature. Three tenth-century passages, by Mas‘ūdī, the author of the *Ta’rīkh Bāb al-abwāb*, and Ibn Faḍlān will be used, each describing Rus’ warrior groups who – in one way or another – can be described as ‘slave soldiers’.⁷⁷⁶ I include both military slaves and mercenaries in this category, who although technically and legally free might have endured similar conditions as military (or other) slaves. In order to meet the described challenge, I will make comparisons – partly employing selected cross-cultural examples – between the Rus’ ‘slave soldiers’ and the host societies’ own subordinate warrior groups, aided by associated social or legal concepts.

The subordination of Rus’ warriors had multiple shades, one which was affecting their ‘life’ even after ‘death’. Retinue members seem to have had obligations for their lord even after his passing from the material world. Since the descriptions are scant, a closer scrutiny based on their terminologies and semantics will be included, and passages will be compared with analogous historical examples drawn from the Mid-Eurasian steppe region (as in present day Ukraine, Russia, the Caucasus, Kazakhstan and Mongolia), Byzantium, as well as the Islamic world, and the Scandinavian sphere. These will aid my assessment of the social status of warrior groups with Scandinavian affiliations in the East.

Scandinavian and Rus’ captives in the East

In 844, a large viking fleet suffered a devastating defeat from the local Muslims near the town of Seville, after which more than a thousand of them were killed, and four hundred captured, whom — as Andalusian storytellers record — were beheaded on site.⁷⁷⁷ The earliest contemporary writer recording the event was al-Ya‘qūbī. His *Kitāb al-Buldān* (finished in 891) identifies the attackers as a specific group of the *majūs* (‘fire-worshippers’), called ar-Rūs.⁷⁷⁸ Most historians raise doubts on the possibility of an Andalusian raid conducted by the Rus’, however, as argued recently, both textological and geopolitical details suggest that this was not impossible as other Scandinavian groups, closer in vicinity to Umayyad Hispania, might have been part of the same community in the eyes of Muslim contemporaries.⁷⁷⁹

century (Harlow: Longman, 1986), 158–60, 206–10; I. P. Petrushevskiy, “K istorii rabstva v Khalifate vii-x vekov”, *Narodi Azii i Afriki* 3 (1971): 66–7; Matthew S. Gordon, “Slavery in the Islamic Middle East (c. 600–1000 CE)”, in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Vol. 2: AD 500–AD 1420, eds. Craig Perry, David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman and David Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 354–7.

⁷⁷⁶ Apart from the very late Viking Age, Scandinavian combatants cannot be described as ‘soldiers’ but only as ‘warriors’. I stick to the ‘slave soldier’ designation only due to the Islamic usage of the term to avoid confusion.

⁷⁷⁷ Lunde and Stone (ed. and trans.), *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of the Darkness*, 109.

⁷⁷⁸ BGA I–7, 354.

⁷⁷⁹ E. A. Shinakov and A. V. Fedosov, “The Geopolitical Context of the Rus’ Raid on Seville”, *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History* 67, no. 1 (2022): 5–22.

The Rus' were usually praised for their martial skills and physical prowess, although some written accounts suggest their inferiority in mounted warfare, such as the 'Anonymous Relation' (as preserved by Ibn Rusta and Marwazī), Miskawayh, and Leo Diaconus.⁷⁸⁰ Consequently, armies including Scandinavians occasionally suffered terrible debacles from nomads, Byzantines, and Muslims, cultures with well-developed cavalries, and advanced military technologies. Major defeats are recorded by Mas'ūdī (913),⁷⁸¹ the PVL (in 941, 1018 and 1043),⁷⁸² the *Schechter letter* (940),⁷⁸³ Miskawayh (943),⁷⁸⁴ and Leo Diaconus (971).⁷⁸⁵ It is fair to surmise that such defeats resulted in Rus' prisoners similar to the raid on Sevilla just mentioned.

This assumption is reinforced by accounts in which Rus' warriors are described as being wary of captivity. Leo Diaconus's words about the Rus' preference for suicide over the dreaded servitude was treated in the previous chapter along with the text of Miskawayh, who described this notion in 'practice'. The Byzantine Skylitzēs also notes an ambiguous incident concerning the Byzantine capture of Preslav: after the Greeks set the city on fire, many of the Rus' threw themselves off the precipice whilst others died fighting or taken prisoner.⁷⁸⁶ Whether this story reflect a desperate attempt of some to escape the flames or a conscious choice to avoid captivity or death from enemy hands, however, is not possible to decide.

There is, however, ample evidence for Rus' warriors being captured. The tenth-century peace treaties, agreed after Rus'-Byzantine wars, mention both Byzantine and Rus' enslaved captives. Despite not being written down until several centuries later in the PVL, the authenticity of the peace treaties are rarely questioned, since they derive from a Greek original and clearly mirror Viking Age legislations, and related practices.⁷⁸⁷ One of the articles in the 912 peace treaty suggests that Rus' captives could also be found in other places than Byzantium:

“From this time forth, if a prisoner (*polonyannik*)⁷⁸⁸ of either nation is in durance either of the Russes or of the Greeks, and then sold into another country, any Russ or Greek who happens to be in that locality shall purchase the prisoner and return the person thus

⁷⁸⁰ BGA I–7, 146; Minorsky, *Marvazī on China, the Turks and India*, 23; Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 62; Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 134.

⁷⁸¹ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 18–23.

⁷⁸² PVL 22–3, 63, 67.

⁷⁸³ Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew documents of the tenth century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 115–21.

⁷⁸⁴ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 62–7.

⁷⁸⁵ Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 142–57.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis*, 298.

⁷⁸⁷ Martina Stein-Wilkeshuis, “Scandinavians swearing oaths in tenth-century Russia: Pagans and Christians”, *Journal of Medieval History* 28 (2002): 155–68.

⁷⁸⁸ Meaning a 'captive': A. A. Alekseyev and A. S. Gerd (eds.), *Slovar' staroslav'yanskogo yazyka*, Vol. 3 (Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'stva Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, 2006), 59.

purchased to his own native country [...] If any Russ be taken prisoner by the Greeks, he shall likewise be sent back to his native land, and his purchase price shall be repaid [...].”⁷⁸⁹

A subsequent treaty from 945 even specifies that the Rus’ could be ransomed if they were “found labouring as slaves in Greece, providing they are prisoners of war”.⁷⁹⁰

Sometimes defeated soldiers were less lucky. Examples of the maiming of Rus’ captives are found in the PVL. In 1043, the last large Rus’ attack against Byzantium was launched, and around 800 Rus’ soldiers were captured by Byzantine forces, who blinded many of them.⁷⁹¹ Another commentator of the attack, Ibn Al-Athīr, speaks of Rus’ warriors having their right hands cut off, and remarks that “only a few Rus warriors who were [held as] captives with the son of the Rus king were allowed to leave [unharm]ed”.⁷⁹² Maiming was not unique to this campaign. A Rus’ leader fighting on the Byzantine side in the 1071 battle of Manzikert, was captured and taken before the sultan to have his nose cut off.⁷⁹³ Other sources suggest that the fates of Rus’ captives recorded in the Rus’-Byzantine wars in the 970s varied; on one occasion the Byzantines returned Rus’ captives to their comrades stationed in Preslav, but on a later occasion they executed Rus’ warriors, who had been captured during an ambush.⁷⁹⁴ Commander Vyshata, leader of the Rus’ army of 1043, was released from Greek captivity after three years.⁷⁹⁵

This list of fates suggests that forced captivity mainly affected warrior groups. It is, however, possible that parts of the Scandinavian population, who had settled and merged with local Slavs and other eastern peoples, also fell victim to enslavement. A conjectural case is presented in the PVL. After his Kievan campaign in 1018, the Duke of Poland, Bolesław the Brave (992–1025), returned home with 800 prisoners, some who had been the property of Yaroslav the Wise, others part of his nobility – the boyars, and both his sisters.⁷⁹⁶ However, in 1043, all these captives were returned to Yaroslav’s court as part of a dynastic marriage pact.⁷⁹⁷

Partly basing his observations on the works of earlier scholars, the eleventh-century Persian Abū Saʿīd Gardīzī reported in his *Zayn al-akhbār* about the Magyars –inhabiting the south Russian and Ukrainian steppe from the mid- to late ninth century – who repeatedly raided the neighbouring region

⁷⁸⁹ RPC 67; original: PVL 19. Old Slavonic addition mine.

⁷⁹⁰ RPC 75; original: PVL 25.

⁷⁹¹ PVL 67.

⁷⁹² Watson, “Ibn Al-Athīr’s accounts of the Rūs”, 437.

⁷⁹³ Watson, “Ibn Al-Athīr’s accounts of the Rūs”, 437.

⁷⁹⁴ Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, 138–41.

⁷⁹⁵ PVL 67.

⁷⁹⁶ PVL 63.

⁷⁹⁷ PVL 67.

north of the steppe: “The Hungarians [...] go [forth] on raids against the Saqlābs and Rus. They bring back slave[s] (or captive[s] *barde*) thence, take them to the Byzantine [country] and sell them”.⁷⁹⁸ Although this account was written down in the eleventh century, when the Magyars were no longer nomadic and had settled in the Carpathian Basin, the locations and lifestyle described in the text suggest that the account refers to events in the ninth century. Since Gardīzī was building on the earlier tradition of Jayhānī, whose work is lost, this is a safe assumption.⁷⁹⁹ According to our control source, Ibn Rusta, the Magyars led their Slavic slaves to the Byzantine market of Kerch in the Crimea.⁸⁰⁰ It is noteworthy that Gardīzī’s text differentiates between the Rus’ and the *Saqāliba* (rendered here as *Saqlābs*). Both terms may have been used more inclusively than as pure ethnic markers, merely distinguishing between Scandinavians and Slavs,⁸⁰¹ however, in this context the semantic differences do not deter us from seeing both ethnic groups (under whatever designation) as possible targets of Magyar raids.

It is, however, difficult to confirm the validity of Gardīzī’s statement. He was, as stated above, using earlier accounts, and my control source, Ibn Rusta in his *Kitāb al-a’lāq al-naftsa*, only mentions Slavs as captives in the ninth-century Magyar raids. Even if Gardīzī is correct in adding the Rus’ as potential targets of nomadic raids,⁸⁰² there is some doubt regarding whether Scandinavians had appeared in the Middle Dnieper area as early as the ninth century, when these raids supposedly took place.⁸⁰³

The same problem applies to another account, regarding similar events. After leaving their headquarters in the Dnieper area in 895, the Magyars migrated to the Carpathian Basin, and on their way passed Kiev. According to a prominent – but from a source-critical point of view contested – source, the twelfth-century Hungarian account called the *Gesta Hungarorum*, serious hostilities broke out at Kiev, ending in victory for the united Magyar tribes, who then forced the ‘Ruthenes’ to pay tribute, and send their sons as hostages.⁸⁰⁴ It is unclear whether the battle was left out of the PVL to spare the reputation of the Rus’ or included in the *Gesta Hungarorum* to provide a powerful account of the Hungarian forebears. A later Hungarian scribe, Simon of Kéza, building partly on Anonymus’s *Gesta* and other earlier sources, simply notes that the Magyars marched past Kiev, without mentioning any warlike activities.⁸⁰⁵ As in the case of Gardīzī’s account, the validity of the Magyar

⁷⁹⁸ Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters”, 161–2.

⁷⁹⁹ Zimonyi, *Muslim Sources on the Magyars*, 19–20, 309–15.

⁸⁰⁰ BGA I–7, 142–3.

⁸⁰¹ Guichard and Meouak, “al-Sakaliba”; Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 349–52.

⁸⁰² Zimonyi, *Muslim Sources on the Magyars*, 309–15.

⁸⁰³ Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, 98–109.

⁸⁰⁴ Anonymus and Master Roger, *Gesta Hungarorum / The Deeds of the Hungarians*, 20–7.

⁸⁰⁵ László Veszprémy and Frank Schaer (eds. and trans.), *Simonis de Kéza Gesta Hungarorum/Simon of Kéza. The Deeds of the Hungarians* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1999), 79.

capture of Scandinavians can only be corroborated by the ninth-century chronology of the PVL. If it is correct, Askold and Dir and their retinues resided in Kiev from the 860's, and Oleg took up residence in 882,⁸⁰⁶ which means that they could have suffered Magyar raids.

For my argument the accuracy of these sources is less important than the fact that they provide credible support for nomadic raids actually affecting the Rus'. Such an example is recorded from the tenth century, when another nomadic tribe, the Pechenegs, replaced the Magyars as southern neighbours to the Kievan Rus'. Similarly to the Magyars, the Pechenegs partly sustained themselves through plunder. According to the *De administrando imperio*, the Pechenegs "can easily come upon the country both of the Russians and of the Turks, and enslave their women and children and ravage their country".⁸⁰⁷ Support is lent to this by one of the PVL's stories. In 968, in the absence of Sviatoslav who was in Bulgaria, the Pechenegs besieged the city of Kiev, where Sviatoslav's mother, Olga, and her grandsons awaited in hunger and despair until the relief army lead by the commander Pretich arrived to rescue them.⁸⁰⁸ Such nomadic raids would have resulted in warrior and/or settler captives, emphasizing the vulnerability of all societal strata of the Rus'.

There are additional examples of Scandinavian groups and individuals being captured. One concerns a Varangian mercenary force, which was engaged in the Georgian civil wars of the mid-eleventh century, where 700 out of 3,000 of its soldiers were captured in the Battle of Sasireti in 1042. The original text of the Georgian chronicles (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*), states that the Varangian prisoners were given provisions and later withdrew through the Likhi mountain range.⁸⁰⁹ Other accounts found in episodes of the Icelandic sagas, confirm that not even high-ranking individuals were spared from captivity. One notable example is the capture of the later Norwegian king, Óláfr Tryggvason and his mother, who are said to have been enslaved for years by Estonian pirates.⁸¹⁰ Another example would be Haraldr *hárðráði*, whose saga describes his imprisonment by the Byzantine Emperor.⁸¹¹ None of these higher-ranking individuals seem to be hostages as they were not offered for ransom.

To sum up, the review of historical sources reveals that captivity seems to have been a dreaded possibility for Scandinavians and Rus', one which may not only have been associated with afterlife slave service. It could also have resulted in forced manual labour, such as agricultural work, maiming, release, massacre, or becoming a slave trade commodity. Another option was being forced to become a fighter for a victor, a scenario that will be my focus below.

⁸⁰⁶ PVL 14.

⁸⁰⁷ DAI 50–3.

⁸⁰⁸ PVL 31–2.

⁸⁰⁹ Shepard, "Yngvarr's expedition to the east", 279.

⁸¹⁰ *Óláfs saga Tryggvassonar*, in Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*, Vol 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit, no. 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 230, 301.

⁸¹¹ *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, in Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*, Vol. 3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit, no. 28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 85.

Slave soldiers

Three other passages, from three different texts, require attention in relation to Rus' captivity and slavery. All sources concern the military aspects of the phenomena described, and all three deal with the employment of Rus' warriors. The first source is a description of the Khazar army, by the Muslim geographer, al-Mas'ūdī, in his *Murūj al-Dahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems); the second is a passage about Rus' warriors in the service of a late tenth-century Derbent Emir in the eleventh-century anonymous *Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb* (History of Derbent), preserved in the later work of the Ottoman writer Münejjim-bashī; and the third is an account about a Rus' royal retinue, recounted by the Arabic diplomat, Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān in his *Kitāb* (Map 4.).

The first text implies a special destiny for Rus' captives, meaning neither death nor 'traditional' enslavement – in the sense of physical work for someone else – although it does clearly imply subjugation. Mas'ūdī's account deals with Rus' and *Saqāliba* warriors in the Khazar capital, Itil, in the Volga delta, c. 950: "The Rus and the Slavs whom we have said are non-scripturalists are the soldiers of the King and his slaves ('*abīd*')."⁸¹² The Arabic word '*abd*' (pl. '*abīd*') was used as a general term for slaves in the Islamic world,⁸¹³ and it is interesting that the original Arabic text does not differentiate between the Rus', and the *Saqāliba*, as in one being soldier, and the other slave.⁸¹⁴ Especially in the light of the previous discussion (i.e. the Rus' were frequently taken captive), hence, I am inclined to read the text *verbatim*, implying that both Rus', and *Saqāliba* were found among the slaves. Moreover, both groups were included in a special enslavement category: 'slave soldiers'. The exact implications of the term are difficult to discern, but certain interpretations of their tasks have been suggested, namely that they formed a Khazar version of the Varangian guard, known from Constantinople.⁸¹⁵ The comparison, to my mind, hardly works, as neither the Varangian guard consisted of slave soldiers, nor the Khazarian Rus' '*abīd*' worked like a paid voluntary regiment entrusted with bodyguard duties. The only similarity remains that they both consisted of foreigners.

My interpretation of the role of the Rus' in the Khazar Khaganate's military forces is based on the inner martial structure of the Khaganate. Firstly, I rely on the fact that unlike bodyguards, the Rus' 'slave soldiers' – together with Muslim artisans and merchants – dwelled on the eastern side of Itil, divided by the Volga river, totally separate from the Khazar ruler's palace and the quarters of his

⁸¹² Montgomery, "Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources", 162. Arabic addition mine. Original: Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 12.

⁸¹³ Robert Brunschvig, "Abd", in *El²*, Vol. 1, ed. H. A. R. Gibb, J. H. Kramers, E. Lévi-Provençal and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 24–40.

⁸¹⁴ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 12.

⁸¹⁵ Montgomery, "Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources", 161–4; Györffy, *Tanulmányok a magyar állam eredetéről*, 60; Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, 7.

closest retinue, which consisted of ethnic Khazars.⁸¹⁶ Secondly, the benefit of having a separate Rus' slave force is not obvious until it is related to other military contingents of the Khaganate, and perhaps, as Mas'ūdī's work states, that the Khazar rulers were not in full control of the main Muslim army in Itil. An instance that endorses this is what happened after the Rus' plunder of Muslim territories in the Caspian region in 913, which ended with a Khazar Muslim massacre of the Rus' force. The Khazar ruler was unable to prevent his subjects from avenging the plunder despite the fact that earlier he himself had made a pact with the Rus'.⁸¹⁷ In addition, Mas'ūdī claims that the Khazar Muslims were unwilling to take up arms against their own. This was paired with fears that if the Christian and the Muslim population of Itil were to unite, the position of the Khazar ruler could be threatened.⁸¹⁸ These may have been two reasons for keeping Rus' and Slav 'slave soldiers' in Itil, since they would not have hesitated in fighting Muslims, and their presence could serve to counteract the disobedient and sometimes unreliable Muslim military contingent numbering some 7,000–12,000.⁸¹⁹

Thus, the information in Mas'ūdī's work provides further support for the conscription, or enslavement of captured Rus' into hostile armies suggested in my review of historical sources above. Also, there are analogous events involving other groups than the Rus', which confirm that the practice was common. There are, for instance, two descriptions of Magyar captured warriors integrated into local retinues. Liutprand of Cremona – a major source for tenth-century Byzantine court politics – reports that in 966, 40 Magyar warriors were captured by Emperor Nikephoros Phokas II (963–9), and that all of them were incorporated into the emperor's bodyguard.⁸²⁰ Magyars suffered a similar fate during an Andalusian raid in 942, when five captured soldiers were incorporated into the bodyguard of the Muslim Caliph, and were forced to convert to Islam.⁸²¹ These Muslim and Byzantine practices did not merely affect nomadic captives but other peoples in the East as well.⁸²² Potential nomadic rivals of the Rus' in the East also enlarged their numbers through this principle, by adopting subjugated tribes into their own ranks. This, therefore remains the most likely option for the presence of Rus' 'slave soldiers' in the Khaganate. The possibility of the phenomenon in other localities is undocumented for the Rus' but remains likely as the following incident suggest.

⁸¹⁶ BGA I–1, 220–2; Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 7–9; Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 256–7.

⁸¹⁷ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 18–23.

⁸¹⁸ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 10, 12.

⁸¹⁹ Cf. Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, with BGA I–1, 221.

⁸²⁰ Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana*, 199.

⁸²¹ István Elter, *Ibn Ḥayyān a kalandozó magyarokról* (Szeged: Középkortörténeti Könyvtár, 2009), 63.

⁸²² Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 27–47; cf. Sato Kentaro, "Slave elites and the Ṣaḡālība in Al-Andalus in the Ummayyad Period", in *Slave elites in the Middle East and Africa. A comparative study*, eds. Miura Toru and John Edward Philips (London: Kegan Paul, 2000), 27–8.

There is another account involving Rus' 'slave soldiers' in the *Ta'rikh Bāb al-abwāb*, relating to the history of Derbent. Between 987 and 989, Emir Maymūn ibn Aḥmad, the ruler of Derbent, was said to have pagan Rus' *ghilmān* (sing. *ghulām*) in his service.⁸²³ In 987, the Rus' had been invited to Derbent as paid allies, but out of an expected 18 ships, they only sent one to investigate whether the emir's intentions were sincere. For unknown reasons the crew of the ship was massacred upon arrival by subjects of the emir, and in revenge the other Rus' plundered the countryside. Two years later, however, Rus' *ghilmān* were found in the emir's service. Although other Islamic rivals called for the emir to convert them to Islam, he is said to have remained reluctant.⁸²⁴

The question is whether these Rus' *ghilmān* should be seen as 'slave soldiers' rather than mercenaries. The term most frequently denotes soldiers of slave origin in Islamic documents across the centuries.⁸²⁵ Although the practice of using 'slave soldiers' was one of the hallmarks of early Muslim military history culminating in the *mamlūk* institution,⁸²⁶ the term *ghulām* also had multiple other semantic uses, and sometimes incorporates other, related meanings, such as 'apprentice', 'youth' and 'personal servant'.⁸²⁷ It could also refer to members of any armed retinue (even Byzantines for instance),⁸²⁸ which suggests that the institution of military slavery was an Islamic adoption of the Eurasian *comitatus* system, perhaps implying that the 'slave' status was not so relevant.⁸²⁹ However, the persistence of military slavery in Islamic culture contradicts this, implying that it was a unique cultural institution with a special connotation regarding the 'slave' status, which in certain cases was relativized.⁸³⁰ Occasional units of captive status do surface here and there throughout history, however, professional slave soldiers in significant numbers forming a substantial (or predominant) part of fighting units within a polity do not appear before the development of the medieval Islamic states.⁸³¹

⁸²³ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 45–6 (Arabic: 19).

⁸²⁴ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 45.

⁸²⁵ Dominique Sourdél, Clifford E. Bosworth, Peter Hardy and Halil Inalcik, "Ghulām", in *El²*, ed. B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 1082–3.

⁸²⁶ See note 739.

⁸²⁷ Paul G. Forand, "The Relation of the Slave and the Client to the Master or Patron in Medieval Islam", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, no. 1 (1971): 59–66; Pipes, *Slave soldiers and Islam*, 195; Sourdél et al., "Ghulām", 1079; Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 262, n. 8.

⁸²⁸ Peter B. Golden, "Khazar Turkic Ghulāms in Caliphal Service", *Journal Asiatique* 292, no. 1–2 (2004): 283–9.

⁸²⁹ Christopher I. Beckwith, "Aspects of the Early History of the Central Asian Guard Corps in Islam", *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 4 (1984): 29–43.

⁸³⁰ Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra, A. H. 200–275/815–889 CE* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 1–2, 17–23, 156; Reuven Amitai, "The Mamlūk Institution: or One Thousand Years of Military Slavery in the Islamic World", in *Arming Slaves. From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, eds. Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New Haven: University Press, 2006), 40–78; Gordon, "Slavery in the Islamic Middle East", 355.

⁸³¹ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 62–71.

In the present context it is obvious that the term here denotes warriors, not household slaves. This persisted for some time as the twelfth-century Persian writer Ẓahīr al-Dīn Mar‘ashī states that a Rus’ *ghulām* was in the service of the Tabaristan emir Ghaṣi Rustem, who ordered him to assassinate his rival.⁸³² From an Islamic perspective, the expectations of the Derbent Rus’ to receive payment would not have made any difference in this respect, since ‘slave soldiers’ (including *ghilmān*) could reach high-ranking social positions, and obtain riches in spite of their supposed lowly origins. In principle, the Rus’ *ghilmān* that were found in Emir Maymūn ibn Aḥmad’s service in 989 could simply have been captured enemy soldiers – possibly from the conflict two years earlier – considered as ‘slave soldiers’ by their new Muslim masters.

Afterlife bodyguards

Another type of subordinate military position – comparable with ‘slave soldiery’ – also existed, and appears in Ibn Faḍlān’s famous travel narrative, written during his diplomatic mission from Baghdad to the Volga Bulghar court in 921–2, where he encountered the Rus’ (*Map 4*). Besides giving invaluable information on Rus’ customs and ritual behaviour along the Volga, the Arab traveller described the court of a so-called Rus’ king (*malik*) as being quite similar to that of the Khazar khagans; the Rus’ king never leaves his palace but sits on his throne with his slave girls and selected retinue:

“One of the customs of the king of the Rūs’ is to have 400 men (*rajul*) in his palace, who are the bravest of his companions (*ṣanādīd aṣḥābihi*), men upon whom he can count (*ahl al-thiqa ‘indahu*). These are the men who die when he dies and allow themselves to be killed for him (*yuqṭalūna dūnahu*). Each of them has a slave girl who serves him, washes his head and prepares everything that he eats or drinks, and then there is another slave girl with whom he sleeps. These 400 men sit below the king’s throne, which is immense and encrusted with the finest gems.”⁸³³

⁸³² Bernhard Dorn (ed.), *Sehir-eddin’s Geschichte von Tabaristan, Rujan und Masanderan* (Saint Petersburg: Der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1850), 243.

⁸³³ Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of the Darkness*, 54–55; Arabic additions mine. Original: Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 252. I go here with Lunde and Stone’s translation as Montgomery gives a slightly different reading about one of the crucial sentences: “They die when he dies and *sacrifice themselves to protect him*” (italics mine). Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 253. The ‘protective function’, in my opinion, is not in the Arabic text and misleadingly implies that the retainers sacrifice concerns only battlefield experience, i. e. the literal defence of the lord from physical harm in real life. This conflicts with my own interpretation of the passage below.

It is noteworthy that Ibn Faḍlān himself did not visit the Rus' court described here, thus his account has to be viewed circumspectly. He may have been misled or confused the information with the Khazar court discussed in the passage that follows immediately.⁸³⁴ Such scepticism, however, may be eased by the fact that Ibn Faḍlān was clearly aware of the different titles of rulers, and he clearly distinguishes the Rus' *malik* from the *malik* of the Khazars who held the title khagan. This is even true if we take into account the manuscript divergencies: Yāqūt's version of the Khazars is more elaborate than the one preserved in the Mashad manuscript and was partly reworked from the information of al-Iṣṭakhrī.⁸³⁵ Yet, the Mashad manuscript still closes with a paragraph on the Khazars, in the beginning of the report they are listed among the peoples whose current affairs Ibn Faḍlān aims to describe, and throughout the *Kitāb* they loom large in the background of the political events necessitating the embassy itself.⁸³⁶ So, even if not by personal observation, Ibn Faḍlān knew the Khazars. In addition, as noted in the previous chapter, several details of the Rus' king's court can be paralleled in Rus' history.

The historical existence of the Rus' *malik* is also confirmed by a separate piece of information in a different layer of the text. Ibn Faḍlān himself witnessed that the *malik*'s name (unfortunately unrecorded by him), together with the name of the dead Rus' chieftain, were carved on a post erected on top of the deceased's mound. This note immediately precedes the introduction of the Rus' court in the narrative. It is not hard to imagine the actual situation which inspired the depiction: the Arabic diplomat, inspecting the carvings on the tomb post, likely asked who this king was and what was known about his rule. This, of course, does not automatically confirm the authenticity of the information, but ensures a counterargument against the straight dismissal of the passage as fantasy. More importantly, details of Ibn Faḍlān's depiction of the Rus' customs and beliefs here are endorsed by analogies from various ethnic milieus, some of which contributed indirectly to the development of an eclectic Rus' culture.

A traditional reading would put it that it is the Germanic *comitatus* of the Rus' king that is described here, the members of which serve their lord in the framework of a patron–client relationship in exchange for gifts and die loyally for him in battle. In such an honour-bound warrior ideology, outliving one's lord was considered a disgrace and accounts related to the Viking Age also emphasize that retainers becoming rootless after the fall of their lord hardly cope with such shame and feel

⁸³⁴ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 254–7.

⁸³⁵ Treadwell, "From *Kitāb* to *Risala*", 51.

⁸³⁶ Nick Evans, "Ibn Fadlan and the Khazars: The hidden centre", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. Jonathan Shepard and Luke Treadwell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 133; Jonathan Shepard, "Failure of a mission?", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. Jonathan Shepard and Luke Treadwell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 369.

socially dead on account of becoming rootless with the fall of their lord.⁸³⁷ The interpretation of the passage can be taken a step further based on the crucial sentence: “These are the men who die when he dies and allow themselves to be killed for him.” The expression “*yuqṭalūna dūnahu*”⁸³⁸ literally translates as “they get killed without him”. This is indeed how other translations render and also interpret the passage: [they] “are killed for his sake”,⁸³⁹ “take a leave because of him”,⁸⁴⁰ “subject themselves to death for him”,⁸⁴¹ “make themselves killed for him”⁸⁴² or literally “die upon his death (together with him)”.⁸⁴³ The semantics are in accord with the first part of the sentence, that is, with the retainers’ death upon their master’s. The statement that they “die when he dies”, is explicit and alludes to the retinue’s (self-)sacrifice upon the master’s passing. Although a literal reading of this passage may raise doubts, the historical circumstances give weight to the interpretation of this custom as not so extraordinary in that ethno-cultural milieu.

The phenomenon thus described bears close resemblance to that of the *suttee*, or *sati*, the Indian custom where widows, or servants self-sacrificed – or more likely – were sacrificed upon the death of husband or masters. Although disputed, this seems to have been a practice among Viking Age Scandinavians. Human sacrifice is not unknown in Scandinavian sources, but usually in relation to female servants and widows (*suttee*) as well as men on account of shame or another reason.⁸⁴⁴ So-called ‘double-graves’, in which a body unaccompanied by grave goods and sometimes showing signs of trauma is laid to rest with a better furnished skeleton, is often interpreted by archaeologists as a resting place of master and sacrificed slave.⁸⁴⁵ The custom of the *suttee* is well-documented among the Rus’ too. Besides the slave girl’s voluntary sacrifice in Ibn Faḍlān’s description, other Muslim writers, Ibn Rusta, Mas’ūdī, Ibn Ḥawqal and Miskawayh, also note the same custom.⁸⁴⁶ The archaeological evidence in Rus’ also yielded ‘double graves’: Shestovitsa’s barrows frequently contain young females in retainer graves with horses. These women unlikely to have died from natural

⁸³⁷ Hamilton Martin Smyser, “Ibn Fadlan’s Account of the Rus with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to Beowulf”, in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun*, eds. Jess B. Bessinger and Robert P. Creed (New York: New York University Press), 102–3; Harris, “Love and Death”, 305.

⁸³⁸ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 252.

⁸³⁹ Richard N. Frye (trans.), *Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2005), 70–1.

⁸⁴⁰ A. P. Kovalevskiy (trans.), *Kniga Akhmeda Ibn Faḍlāna o ego puteshestvii na Volgu 921–2* (Kharkiv: Izdatelstvo Gos. Universiteta, 1956), 146.

⁸⁴¹ Kovalevskiy (trans.), *Kniga Akhmeda Ibn Faḍlāna*, 264, 880.

⁸⁴² Ibn Faḍlān, *Voyage chez les Bulgares de la Volga*, trans. Marius Canard (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), 84; Ibn Faḍlān, *Beszámoló a volgai bulgárok földjén tett utazásról*, trans. Róbert Simon (Budapest: Corvina, 2007), 99.

⁸⁴³ Zeki Validi Ahmed Togan, *Ibn Fadlan’s Reisebericht* (Leipzig: Kommissionsverlag F. A. Brockhaus, 1939), 97.

⁸⁴⁴ Edholm, *Människooffer i myt och minne*, 214–22.

⁸⁴⁵ Brink, *Vikingarnas slavar*, 224–36.

⁸⁴⁶ BGA I–7, 146–7; Maḥoudi, *Les prairies d’or*, Vol. 2, 9; BGA II–1, 397; Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 66.

causes and are most probably slaves or wives. Some of them possess a finger ring perhaps indicative of their (symbolically) wedded status to the warriors as described by Ibn Faḍlān.⁸⁴⁷

Among the Rus', such human sacrifice was not confined to the female sphere. Miskawayh notes that when a Rus' dies, his wife or womenfolk or perhaps his male slave/retainer (*ghulāmahu*), are buried with him.⁸⁴⁸ Ibn Faḍlān is also explicit in gendered terms, as he notes that male servants are also asked whether they are willing to die with a lord, and sometimes volunteer even if less frequently than women.⁸⁴⁹

It is also remarkable that he employs the Arabic word *ghilmān* to describe these slaves and also those who surround the chieftain in 'Paradise' according to the slave girl's words reiterated to him. Ibn Faḍlān employs the word, *ghilmān* in several meanings in his text,⁸⁵⁰ and it cannot be determined whether the afterlife *ghilmān* of the Rus' chieftain are actually household servants or truly armed retainers. In the Quran, young *ghilmān* surround cheerful Muslims in *al-jannah* (52:24, 56:17).⁸⁵¹ They obviously perform duties of household servants there.⁸⁵²

Among Ibn Faḍlān's varied semantic usages of the term, however, there are indications that allow seeing the *ghilmān* as warriors. Once, he remarks, somewhat astonished that the Volga Bulghar ruler was riding through a market unaccompanied, "without (a) *ghulām*",⁸⁵³ a surprise probably arising from seeing the ruler unprotected by his bodyguard. In another passage that is even more telling, he explicitly calls warriors killed by an Oghuz chief *ghilmān* who (in addition) serve the chief in the afterlife.⁸⁵⁴ This is a straightforward expression of his concept that *ghilmān* serving a lord in the afterlife could also denote armed retainers. This gains support from the previous discussion of Rus' warriors labelled as *ghilmān* in the *Ta'rikh Bāb al-abwāb*. The accounts of Leo Diaconus, and Miskawayh, cited in the previous chapter, both emphasise the importance of one's manner of death for the ensuing afterlife, and confirm that suicide was not alien to Rus' warriors.

A further indication supporting the interpretation of *ghilmān* as armed retainers in the afterlife comes from general knowledge of the Viking Age organization of warbands. In a Viking Age retinue, and in similar social structures across the Slavic regions and the steppes, retainers were regarded as the extended family of a chieftain. Recruitment stretched outside kinship or family ties, but retainers were adopted into the household by sacred oaths and shared the same space under the chieftain's

⁸⁴⁷ Shepard, "Shestovytsya revisited", 31–2.

⁸⁴⁸ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 66.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 246–7.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 262, no. 8.

⁸⁵¹ *Al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* 524, 535.

⁸⁵² Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire*, 91–2; They are usually regarded as the children of unbelievers forced to afterlife slavery, see: Lange, *Paradise and Hell*, 142.

⁸⁵³ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 228.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 208–9.

roof.⁸⁵⁵ In the case of Ibn Faḍlān's *ghilmān*, it is striking that they are described in 'Paradise' with the whole dead kindred of the Rus' chieftain and are specifically listed alongside the other men (possibly relatives) who surround him.⁸⁵⁶ The mention in an enumeration of kin members might show a symbolic integration into the extended kin group. Thus, Ibn Faḍlān might actually have described the same phenomenon here as in the case of the *malik*'s retainers: that is, male armed followers were on occasion sacrificed and follow their lords to the afterlife. Theoretical approaches to such fighting units introduced earlier further strengthen this point. Identity fusion creating strong visceral and emotional bonds among group members who shared a similar world view and traumatic experiences could facilitate extreme devotion to the group even at the expense of self.⁸⁵⁷

It is entirely likely that the Arabic observer translated the notion of Rus' afterlife according to his own cultural understanding of similar phenomena. However, even though Ibn Faḍlān's passage is the only one on similar customs in the documentary evidence about the Rus' or Scandinavians in general, there is evidence for similar customs, which were not transmitted to us through Islamic outsiders. Evidence of this custom comes from Eastern Eurasia, where mass sacrifice of one's (own) retainers was also practised. One account suffices to make it clear that these texts do not suggest mere symbolic disgrace after the master's death, but literally the sacrifice of retainers. A Latin account, Alberic of Trois-Fontaines, probably building on well-informed intelligence, describes such an instance in the thirteenth century. Prince Jonah, a Cuman chief who died in Constantinople in 1241, was buried outside the city walls in a tumulus (following pagan custom), and he was accompanied by 26 horses and 8 armour-bearers who volunteered to die with him ("octo armigeri appensi sunt vivi a dextris et a sinistris et ita voluntarie mortui").⁸⁵⁸ Although Alberic might have exaggerated in his account, the specificity of the description suggests that the core information came from an eyewitness. This can be supported by an analogous passage in the thirteenth-century chronicle of the French writer Jean de Joinville, who relied on the eyewitness report of a certain Philippe de Toucy when recording a Cuman funeral quite similar to Alberic's. According to this, at the funeral of a high-ranking Cuman official, his best sergeant followed him into the grave alive, seemingly voluntarily.⁸⁵⁹

The timespan of these accounts from the Viking Age is not as problematic as it might seem at first glance. The custom, in fact, had a long history in Eurasia and continuity in the steppe and neighbouring cultures along the Silk Roads. Self-sacrificial retinues are recorded in analogous

⁸⁵⁵ Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Warrior identities in Viking-Age Scandinavia", 183–6.

⁸⁵⁶ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 248–9.

⁸⁵⁷ Raffield et al., "Ingroup identification, identity fusion and the formation of Viking warbands", *World Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (2016): 37–8.

⁸⁵⁸ Albericus Trium Fontium, *Chronicon*, ed. Paulus Scheffer-Boichorst, MGH Scriptorum, no. 23 (Leipzig: Karl W. Hiersemann, 1925), 950.

⁸⁵⁹ *La vie de Saint Louis: le témoignage de Jehan, seigneur de Joinville*, ed. Noël L. Corbett (Sherbrooke: Naaman, 1977), 186–7.

situations among the Scythians, Hephthalites, Xiongnu, Tibetans, Türks and later even some Indians, covering a time span from antiquity to the thirteenth century.⁸⁶⁰ The most enigmatic of these anthropological descriptions is that of Herodotus about Scythian royal funerals, where five retainers of specific tasks are killed during the first phase, and later 50 other young males are strangled and put on stuffed horses to guard the king's mound.⁸⁶¹ Herodotus's anthropological descriptions can of course be accused of distortion and the application of classical *topoi* that characterized ancient literature. A comparison of his passage with archaeological evidence of the Scythians, however, yielded shocking results. As demonstrated by Askold Ivantchik, almost all the details of Herodotus's description are supported in various kinds of Scythian aristocratic and royal funeral evidence.⁸⁶² This also entailed the sacrifice of retainers to accompany high-ranking leaders to the grave. The most emblematic mound containing such male retainers comes from Arzhan in the Tuva region of Siberia, where 15 retainers and 160 horses were freshly killed for the ritual (*Fig. 13*). Other similar kurgans are found in Solokha, Chertomlyk, Tolstaya mogila at Ordžonikidze, Aleksandropol and Ogyz.⁸⁶³

Such a comparison works to reinforce some trust in ancient descriptions of customs which seem extravagant from a modern critical point of view. Ibn Faḍlān was concerned with a conscious construction of the 'other' in his description of the steppe people and Rus', picking out details from their customs that were farthest from his own cultural background. Nevertheless, the agreement of unrelated sources on a custom that was preserved for a long time deserves serious historical consideration. Most of these accounts even agree that the closest and most distinguished retainers of a ruler were sacrificed or committed suicide, just as in the case of the Rus' king's "bravest companions" (*ṣanādīd aṣḥābihi*) and "most trusted men" (*ahl al-thiqa 'indahu*).⁸⁶⁴

The least reconcilable part of Ibn Faḍlān's report with knowledge of historical realities is the unusually high number of (sacrificial) retinue members. The comparative examples usually give much lower numbers of retainers, individuals or a few dozen men, who followed their leader to the

⁸⁶⁰ Henry Yule (ed. and trans.), *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, Vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1871), 276, 283–4, n. 5; Hilda Ecsedy, "A note on 'slavery' in the Turk rulers' burial customs (around 649 A.D.)", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 42, no. 1 (1988): 3–16; Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: a history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: University Press, 2009), 13–24; Barry Cunliffe, *By steppe, desert and ocean. The birth of Eurasia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 225–6, 272. We possess several accounts about human sacrifices among the Mongols, some of them highlighting that it was the favourite slave (or slaves) of the dead ruler who had to follow him into the grave. However, none of the accounts make it explicit that any of these would be warriors even if we might allow for the possibility. See the presentation of sources in: Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde. Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 263–7.

⁸⁶¹ Nigel G. Wilson (ed.), *Herodoti Historiae. Tomus prior: Libros I–IV continens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 370–1.

⁸⁶² Askold I. Ivantchik, "The Funeral of Scythian Kings: The historical reality and the description of Herodotus (IV, 71–72)", in *The Barbarians of Ancient Europe. Realities and Interactions*, ed. Larissa Bonfante (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71–106.

⁸⁶³ Renate Rolle, *Totenkult der Skythen. Das Steppengebiet*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1979), 91–6.

⁸⁶⁴ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 252–3.

afterlife, with the exception of Herodotus's 55. A statement of the second-century BCE Chinese 'Grand Historian', Sima Qian, on "hundreds or even thousands" of favoured ministers and concubines following Xiongnu rulers to their graves,⁸⁶⁵ is quite extreme in light of the lack of comparative evidence, written or archaeological. Hundreds of Rus' retinue members following their master to the grave *en masse* should be dismissed as inaccurate, not only for the lack of analogies and other contemporary witnesses. Such a mass sacrifice would probably have shaken a contemporary military structure like that of the Rus'. There is a chance that the information, conveyed to Ibn Faḍlān by an outsider and through an interpreter, was partly misunderstood. Most logically, it means that some retainers had to volunteer for death when the king died, similar to the Rus' chieftain's *ghilmān*, where it is made explicit in the text. The situation can be compared with what was reported about Türk generals in Chinese service, who, upon the death of T'ai-zong, the second emperor of the T'ang Dynasty (626–49), requested permission to commit suicide and be buried with their dead leader. Although they were denied permission, one committed suicide anyway.⁸⁶⁶ The sacrifice of retainers probably could have occurred by individual selection.

Both Ibn Faḍlān's description of the Rus' afterlife as well as his semantics of warrior- and servanthood betrays his Islamic background as much as all could be regarded his own fabrication were there no analogies for connected beliefs and other talebearer hints of steppe influences on the Rus' in other sources. It should also be emphasized that eschatological views of steppe pagan belief systems are extremely poorly known, and when do feature in accounts they are on the one hand mostly in sources of an outsider perspective, on the other hand we do not know to what extent do they reflect monotheistic influence. Thus, an exceptional Rus' ruler and his retinue, heard about in a steppe cultural milieu along the Volga, would fit a picture of the spread of a wider custom of afterlife retinue service that had originated in Central Asia.

That in exceptional cases Viking Age Scandinavians were receptive of foreign models of afterlife beliefs and related rituals of a similar nature is endorsed by the most famous chamber-grave of Hedeby, a triple weapon burial unique in the entire North (*Fig. 14*).⁸⁶⁷ The three buried persons lying in the bipartite burial chamber under (and not on or inside) a longship covered by a mound were interred with elaborate furnishings: costly Carolingian swords, shields, an iron knife, arrows, riding equipment and probably three horses, (belt) fittings, a glass beaker, a bronze bowl and a water bucket, thus being amply prepared for an otherworld journey and afterlife. In the left part of the wooden chamber – partitioned unequally by a low vertical plank – rested the most opulently equipped person

⁸⁶⁵ Burton Watson (trans.), *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty*, Vol. 2, revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 137.

⁸⁶⁶ Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, 21.

⁸⁶⁷ For an elaborate discussion and presentation of the grave, see: Egon Wamers, "König im Grenzland. Neue Analyse des Bootkammergrabes von Haiḍaby", *Acta Archaeologica* 65 (1994): 1–56.

of the trio, probably the lord. The two other warriors, as usually argued (but of course not conclusively proved), represented his retinue; a *cupbearer* and a *marshal*, both ranks reflecting the adoption of Frankish customs and court ceremonials reflected in contemporary written records. The whole ritual was a curious mixture of pagan burial rites and continental Christian attitudes of social stratification as well as beliefs (represented by paradise or salvation iconography on the lord's sword, or four crosses on the iron rim of the water bucket for instance). The mound, 40-meter high, was positioned along the border of Danish and German territories, next to a road leading to the southern gate of the town of Hedeby, serving as a visible memento of greatness for any visitor. The complex is dated to the first half of the ninth century and definitely belonged to the highest nobility of early Danish society, in all likelihood to the Danish king Haraldr Klak Hálfðansson (c. 785–c. 852) himself.

Among Scandinavian Viking Age graves this is the only one so far where the accompanying individuals were (presumably) weapon-bearing males and not (possibly) 'household' slaves as in the better-known examples of Oseberg, Île de Groix, Balladoole, Ballateare (both on the Isle of Man) and Westness (Orkney).⁸⁶⁸ That the two individuals died at the same time as of the lord on account of illness, old age or warfare, would be a huge coincidence in contrast to the more mundane assumption that they were sacrificed willingly or unwillingly.⁸⁶⁹

The customs related to the Hedeby chamber-grave compare well with that of the Rus' king's court: retainers are sacrificed upon the ruler's death, who definitely regards himself on the highest echelons of society (a king), whilst foreign influences, Frankish and Khazar respectively, penetrate court ceremonials. Distinctive objects resulting from far-away contacts of travel behooved adventurous leaders. It is no wonder that a Rus' king possessed such inventory if even one of his subordinates, a chieftain, was buried with a mass amount of them, exactly like the 'king' in the Hedeby burial chamber. The Rus' chieftain's burial mound – with the king's name on it (!) – was erected in disputed territories, somewhat reminiscent of the Hedeby burial, or that of Île de Groix in Brittany. Due to the poor preservation of the bodies and their original lay-outs, no certainties can be offered regarding the Black Grave, however, similar ideas perhaps could have permeated the ritual there too and not need to be outright dismissed. It has already been raised early on that the grave goods – two spears, two swords, two sabres – must have been distributed between two individuals, and that one of the bodies (perhaps the third, identified as female?) was cremated on the pyre as part of the ritual.⁸⁷⁰ The custom of retainer 'sacrifices' could have been pronounced among the active, expansive viking caste under foreign influence, who had obviously developed a special warrior ethos or had chosen particular

⁸⁶⁸ Wamers, "König im Grenzland", 40–1.

⁸⁶⁹ Wamers, "König im Grenzland", 41.

⁸⁷⁰ For discussion see, Kainov, "The 'large sword' from Chorna Mohyla", 154.

aspects of Germanic and foreign beliefs as their ideology.⁸⁷¹ Strong personal bonds would have been difficult to transfer to a succeeding ruler in a power competitive environment. In exceptional cases such as these, vikings demonstrated adaptiveness for extreme ideas at both ends of the diasporas.

Final remarks

The ‘slave soldiers’ in Mas‘ūdī’s text were most likely captured in battle, while Ibn Faḍlān’s account deals with the warriors of the Rus’ king himself. Hence, the relationship of the latter should perhaps be examined more as a patron-client bond. In that case it would probably be more accurate to label these potentially self-sacrificing retainers as warriors of diminished possibilities, and one cannot help to wonder how willingly – from a psychological perspective – these warriors would have died for their commander.⁸⁷² It also raises questions regarding how their social position limited their options, and restricted their free will, compared to the options available to ‘slave soldiers’.

Liminal barriers – distinguishing between mercenaries and ‘slave soldiers’, or free and unfree – that these warrior groups had to cross represent a scholarly dilemma aptly illustrated by Montgomery’s views on the Rus’ that Ibn Faḍlān encountered on his journeys. Montgomery argues that they had identical backgrounds to those Rus’ described by Mas‘ūdī – i. e. that they came from Khazaria – although Montgomery is hesitant whether to label them as mercenaries, or as Mas‘ūdī describes them, ‘slave soldiers’.⁸⁷³ Others have also described *ghilmān* as a liminal phenomenon with a status somewhere in-between free and unfree.⁸⁷⁴ Several examples are found for the polysemic usage of the terms in Ibn Faḍlān’s text, who refers to various groups as *ghilmān*: his personal servants, the Rus’ chieftain’s afterlife retainers, even the Khazar Khagan’s Muslim commander.⁸⁷⁵ Similarly, to Miskawayh’s mind there seems to be little distinction between a warrior and a servant mirrored in his labelling the Muslim leader Marzubān’s retainers and the Rus’ sacrificial servants both as *ghilmān*.⁸⁷⁶ I cannot find any comparative support for how to define any of these ambiguous slave categories, which leads to the question of the actual difference between exceptional *ghilmān* of corroborated slave status, owning slaves of their own, and the 400 retainers of the Rus’ king mentioned earlier, who each had two female slaves. Selected retainers of an elite professional fighting unit like those surrounding the *malik* perhaps had more earthly privileges but also stricter obligations (“they die when” the king “dies”) than others who offered less extreme though nevertheless serious

⁸⁷¹ Cf. Wamers, “König im Grenzland”, 41.

⁸⁷² Timothy Taylor, *The buried soul. How humans invented death* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), 96–108, 128–34.

⁸⁷³ Montgomery, “Vikings and Rus in Arabic Sources”, 163.

⁸⁷⁴ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 308–14.

⁸⁷⁵ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 194, 248, 256.

⁸⁷⁶ E.g. Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 65–6.

devotion for instance, the *ghilmān* having a choice whether to follow their chieftain or, more frequently, be replaced by female slaves.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information regarding the status, conditions, and loyalty of Rus' 'slave soldiers' and mercenaries. A comparison with warrior groups other than the Rus' may perhaps improve our understanding. It remains unclear whether captive enemy warriors, forced into military service by their victors, retained their subjugated status until they died, or if they were able, and allowed to improve their social status. Emperor Nikephoros' dressing of captured Magyar warriors into costly Byzantine vestments,⁸⁷⁷ suggests a more trusted position than that enjoyed by the Rus' soldiers in Itil, mentioned above. It is unlikely that the Rus' in Itil – and other possible nomadic settings – were paid, since Mas'ūdī states that the Khazar Khagan was the only one who could afford a mercenary force in the East, and that monetary compensation only benefitted his Khazar bodyguards, and possibly his Muslim soldiers.⁸⁷⁸ Another mid-tenth-century Muslim author, al-Iṣṭakhrī, noted that the Khazar retinue "[...] are not paid regularly, but are given small amounts at long intervals".⁸⁷⁹ This is consistent with a general practice among eastern nomadic warrior groups during the medieval period, who did not receive regular payment.⁸⁸⁰ Another source that strengthens the suggestions that the Khazar ruler did not pay his Rus' warriors is Ibn Rusta, who does not mention any other troops than the Khazar cavalry, which was sponsored by the realm.⁸⁸¹

Despite not getting paid and their low social status, the Rus' still retained some rights: in Khazaria, where they were judged by pagan law,⁸⁸² and in Derbent, the emir allowed them to remain pagan in spite of the fierce insistence of rival Islamic leaders. Warriors, serving in an alien environment, and clinging to their own religious identity, as part of their self-image, suggests relatively easy relationship with their masters in contrast to those who had to convert, like most Turks, conscripted into Islamic slave armies. Sticking to their old habits might also be a sign of some influence in the locale, paralleled by the unusually strong position of the Muslim cavalry of the Khazars. Lastly, it could be explained as a tactic on part of the masters, as performing oaths of allegiance only worked effectively if it was thought to be sanctioned in their own proper way by both parties.

Scandinavian accounts provide additional comparisons. It has been suggested that Scandinavian retainers, by pledging oaths to lords (such as the word Varangian implies), accepted that their new masters took control over their lives.⁸⁸³ Although such developments were contemporary with the emergence of historical concepts of honour – where receiving a respected place in a ruler's *hirð* was

⁸⁷⁷ Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana*, 199.

⁸⁷⁸ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 11; BGA I–1, 221; Ibn Fadlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 256–7.

⁸⁷⁹ Lunde and Stone (eds. and trans.), *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of the Darkness*, 154; original: BGA I–1, 221.

⁸⁸⁰ Denis Sinor, "The Inner Asian Warriors", in *Studies in Medieval Inner Asia* (Ashgate: Variorum, 1997), 135.

⁸⁸¹ BGA I–7, 140.

⁸⁸² Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 11.

⁸⁸³ Brink, *Slavery in the Viking Age*, 54.

considered a high reward – these acts also resulted in the loss of legal rights and possibilities.⁸⁸⁴ What is clear is that patron-client relationships always implied some form of servitude, one which could vary from being mutually beneficial to something akin to slavery.

The reduced rights of retinue members are reflected in accounts in the Icelandic sagas, where rulers gift retinue members to other rulers, without the retainers having a say in the matter. In two (related) thirteenth-century sagas, the *Orkneyinga saga* and *Magnússona saga*, Scandinavian warships and their crews are left behind in Constantinople by their masters, to serve the Byzantine Emperor. The first is related to Earl Rögnvaldr's visit to the Holy Land in 1151, when he left Einðridi Ungi behind with six ships in the Byzantine capital for a few years.⁸⁸⁵ The same had been done in 1110 by Sigurðr Jórsalafari ('Jerusalem-farer') (1103–30), who left his ships and crews in Alexios I Komnenos' service before returning to Norway.⁸⁸⁶ A historically more reliable source also confirms the phenomenon: according to Florence of Worcester, in 1040, Earl Godwin presented a lavishly equipped galley with 80 picked warriors in the finest weaponry to the Anglo-Danish king Harthacnut (1035/1040–2).⁸⁸⁷ Although these accounts do not contain references to 'slavery', the status of the retainers after having been 'given away' may be comparable to the diminished rights of 'slave soldiers'. Whether this late- or post-Viking Age practice can be applied to earlier time periods needs further scrutiny, as does the question of whether these accounts describe an exclusively lordly custom, or if it occurred among lesser rulers as well. In the Icelandic *Eyrbyggja saga*, Halli and Leiknir, two retainers of outstanding physical abilities but with difficult tempers, are complaining about having been "given away like slaves" ("selja [...] gefa sem ánauðga men") from the Icelandic chieftain Vermundr to another chieftain called Styrr.⁸⁸⁸ Previously, the two had been gifted by King Eiríkr of Sweden to the Norwegian earl Hákon, and later by the same earl to Vermundr.⁸⁸⁹ In the vocabulary of the Old Norse-Icelandic family and kings' sagas, some definitions associated to free and unfree servants (*þjónn*, *skósveinn*, *húskarl*, *þjónustusveinar*, *knapir*) are explicitly linked to the king's household and *hirð*, and were entrusted with high-profile tasks, such as guarding prisoners and food supplies, serving as messengers, fetching the king's wife, or remaining with the king in his last hour. Slaves were sometimes also allowed to possess arms and participate in conflicts.⁸⁹⁰

⁸⁸⁴ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 44; Iversen, *Trelldommen*, 24–6; Brink, *Vikingarnas slavar*, 152–4, 162–7.

⁸⁸⁵ Finnbogi Guðmundsson (ed.), *Orkneyinga saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. 34 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1965), 221, 236.

⁸⁸⁶ *Magnússona saga*, in Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*, Vol. 3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit. no. 28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002), 253–4.

⁸⁸⁷ Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents c. 500–1042*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, [1955] 1996), 314.

⁸⁸⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (eds.), *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, no. 4. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1935), 64.

⁸⁸⁹ Sveinsson and Þórðarson (eds.), *Eyrbyggja saga*, 61–3.

⁸⁹⁰ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 44, 114, 123; Iversen, *Trelldommen*, 149–53.

Such accounts may of course not be directly transferable to the customs of the retinues of Scandinavian/Rus' leaders in the East. One is reminded of Vladimir's dislike and final transfer of Varangians to Basil II, which, however seem to have gone with the Northerners' consent flavoured with their desire to get paid better. Olga's promise to Constantine to send him soldiery in return for the lavish gifts bestowed on her by the emperor is another example. Whether they were intended to be permanent donations or rather sent as temporary military aid is unclear, although Constantine's request also involved slaves which were unlikely to be transferred back to Rus' at any time.⁸⁹¹ Despite such reservations, it is not improbable that these customs existed in both places, especially when considering other social and political similarities between Rus' and Scandinavia during the Viking Age. Similar social stratification is detectable in the burial record, with the presence of a warrior elite entrusted not only with military but also fiscal and administrative duties.⁸⁹² The sometimes similar patterns of warrior settlement has also been noted: Shestovitsa and Chernigov were perhaps 'twin-settlements' one being a garrison and the other a sacral princely centre, respectively, similar to Birka and the nearby Hovgården.⁸⁹³ The planning of Gnezdovo also demonstrates a Scandinavian model of settlement: the land was divided by fences into regularized plots just as in Ribe, Dublin or Kaupang.⁸⁹⁴ The lack of strong central power always to be challenged by rival chiefs or early state functionaries under the king's command is another similarity as perhaps shown by the comparable case of the careers of *Egils saga's* Þórólfr Kveldúlfsson and Sveneld (ON. Sveinaldr) of the PVL.⁸⁹⁵ The lack of clear successions rules but similarly implemented models of enthronement for the legitimization of power in Scandinavia and Rus' were noted as other parallels by Alexandra Vukovich.⁸⁹⁶

What the implications were of being a Scandinavian or Rus' 'slave soldier' in the East is difficult to establish. It may simply have meant entering into military service, sometimes through captivity. However, it seems that starting as a captive – as I have suggested above – did not exclude advancement, or becoming a trusted member of a retinue. It did probably not exclude the opposite either, that a retainer – freely, or forced to – surrendered parts of his privileges without ever being a captive. However, their new living conditions, their chance of social promotion or risk of demotion have to be examined from two perspectives: that of the warriors', and that of the masters', which may not coincide. In addition, the differences between free and unfree, becomes even more blurred when

⁸⁹¹ PVL 30.

⁸⁹² Mikhajlov, "Chamber-graves as international phenomenon of the Viking Age"; Elena A. Mel'nikova, "Obrazovaniye Drevnerusskogo gosudarstva: sostoyaniye problemy istochnik", *Vostochnaya Yevropa v drevnosti i srednevekov'ye* 13 (2011): 188–97.

⁸⁹³ Androshchuk, "Černigov et Šestovica, Birka et Hovgården".

⁸⁹⁴ Veronika Murasheva, "Rus, routes and sites", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, ed. Jonathan Shepard and Luke Treadwell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 232.

⁸⁹⁵ A. S. Shchavalev, "Dve «kar'yery» funktsionerov rannego gosudarstva: voyevoda Svenel'd i khveding Torol'v Kvel'dul'vsson", *Vestnik NNGU* 4, no. 3 (2013): 72–8.

⁸⁹⁶ Alexandra Vukovich, "Enthronement in Early Rus", *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 14 (2018): 211–39.

they are compared cross-culturally. An interesting question would be whether all observers perceived the Rus' *ghilmān* in the same way? Is it not possible that they themselves saw their role as mercenaries, and that Muslim officials, their masters, and the rest of the societies where they served, saw them as slaves? The *ghilmān* of the Islamic rulers – mostly Turkic captives from the steppe – were specially selected youth, who were not only militarily trained – *de novo* – but also indoctrinated with Islam and loyalty to the ruling regime. It would defeat the whole purpose of the institution if a *ghulām* of the Derbentine Emir, for instance, had lingering sympathies for some other ideological belief or a double identity. Thus, the Rus' in question were perhaps not part of the institutionalized slave corps but were rather temporary fighters, or they may have been integrated into some other auxiliary branch of the Emirate's armed forces.⁸⁹⁷ Yet, the devout preacher Mūsa al-Tūzī, leading a successful rebellion against Maymūn demanded the emir to surrender his Rus' *ghilmān* so that "he might offer them Islam or kill them",⁸⁹⁸ exactly pointing out the problem described. The Rus' were *ghilmān*, but not in the way proper. The Khazar case is comparable: Mas'ūdī's word choice '*abīd*', for Rus' warriors in the Khaganate is quite deliberate in comparison to the other corps described in the realm. However, since we only do know the Khaganate's military structure through external sources, this remains Mas'ūdī's viewpoint. We have no idea how the Khazars themselves saw this Rus' force. Mas'ūdī's attitude towards the Arsīyya, the Khwarazmian Muslim force in Khazar pay, is sympathetic enough to allow them unusual prerogatives in the realm; even disputed legal cases among non-Muslims are to be judged by their Islamic *qādīs*.⁸⁹⁹ It might be, therefore that (similar to Mūsa al-Tūzī's), Mas'ūdī's sensing of local Rus' as '*abīd*', was a necessity from an Islamic perspective: given they are pagan outsiders in the Khazar realm (unlike the Arsīyya, who were Muslims), they could not be anything else than 'slave soldiers': naturally in the way proper.

The ambivalence can be grasped from the other angles as well. Did such warriors, similar to Halli and Leiknir, perceive themselves as slaves because of the poor way they were treated, while wider society saw them as (legally) free? Or, did Ibn Faḍlān have different opinions about the *ghilmān*, who he claimed served a Rus' chieftain as slaves in the afterlife, and the secondary accounts he repeats about the sacrificed free retainers of the Rus' king? How was the latter form of servitude comparable to the Islamic 'slave soldiers' he may already have known from own experience? Without doubt, Scandinavians and Rus' encountered a variety of cultures in the East, each expressing different and variable attitudes towards captives and slaves.

The sources discussed in this chapter illustrate that although Scandinavians and Rus' were generally regarded as formidable adversaries, they also met tough opposition from their Byzantine,

⁸⁹⁷ I owe this observation to a discussion with Samuel Beña.

⁸⁹⁸ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 45 (Arabic: 19).

⁸⁹⁹ Maḡoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 12.

nomadic and Muslim counterparts. Scandinavians and Rus' were not immune to the perils of other inhabitants in these regions, and accordingly the Rus' were sometimes defeated by communities with well-developed – sometimes superior – military structures and technologies. Thus – regardless of social position – they were also subject to captivity. How widespread this phenomenon was during the Viking Age is difficult to assess but, judging from the proviso of the 912 Rus'-Byzantine treaty discussed above, captive Rus' may have been more frequent in various areas of the East than has generally been assumed.

The accounts also suggest that Rus' captives were not all and always immediately executed, tortured, or forced into manual slave labour, but that they could also be recruited, or forced into military service. There does not seem to have been one single fate for the 'slave soldiers' in the East but a variety, depending on such things as: lodgings, provisions, equipment, pay, and concepts of trust and honour. In contrast, other types of military servitude also lead to diminished possibilities, infringed rights, and poor treatment. Whether these warriors were regarded as free or unfree depended on social and legal factors, resulting from a variety of perspectives, not necessarily shared by masters, followers, or observers, due to their distinctive cultural backgrounds.

Chapter 7

Raiders

Raids and larger campaigns conducted by ‘raiding parties’ and ‘armies’ are hallmarks of the viking phenomenon. The reasons triggering the viking raids was and is the subject of long scholarly discussion. Most recent thinking links them to an emerging class of unmarried young males who sought to obtain wealth and reputation by doing great deeds abroad, in order to compete for power and women in the homelands.⁹⁰⁰ Not only the motivation behind viking activity was studied extensively but also the style of warfare, which made the raids successful enough to upset the political scene of Western Europe into turmoil. Judging by the number of participants and the objectives of raids, a slow increase in the scale of viking activity has been noted from the ninth century onwards: the first seasonal raids were ‘hit-and-run’ actions launched only in a few ships by petty war-leaders, which gradually gave way to larger armies led by a number of wanna-be (or real) kings or powerful chieftains assembled through alliances. These armies were able to overwinter in enemy territory from the mid-ninth century onwards. Lastly, the Late Viking Age saw great viking armies led by Scandinavian kings who were able to conquer foreign lands. Although this conceptual model has been slightly modified lately, the intensification of viking activity with the passing of time – both in scale and complexity – still forms the backbone of historical reconstructions.⁹⁰¹

Unfortunately, most of what has been written on the subject concerns the West. This chapter takes a comparative angle by highlighting that Rus’ military activity were not so different from viking atrocities in the West. Small-scale raids were just as frequent in the eastern sphere, whilst an analysis of larger expeditions brings out that army sizes were similar, if not bigger, and viking hosts were organized and operated in the same way in the West and in the East (*Table 2.*). As any comparative study, this one also has to bring out the essential differences between its subjects. Unique conditions in the East arose mainly from contacts with the steppes; any raid or campaign launched in the direction of the lucrative Islamic or Byzantine territories had to traverse through nomadic territory and deal with the steppe dwellers. The threat of nomadic military might have given a peculiar character to Rus’ warfare. The steppe impact also instigated a change in Rus’ weaponry and tactics, and is partly responsible for a high degree of strategic mobility combining fast means of transportations of the Scandinavian and nomadic worlds: ships and horses.

⁹⁰⁰ James H. Barrett, “What caused the Viking Age?”, *Antiquity* 82 (2008): 671–85; Steven P. Ashby, “What really caused the Viking Age? The social content of raiding and exploration”, *Archaeological Dialogues* 22, no. 1 (2015): 89–106; Ben Raffield, Neil Price and Mark Collard, “Polygyny, concubinage and the social life of women in Viking-Age Scandinavia”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13 (2017): 165–209.

⁹⁰¹ Williams, “Raiding and Warfare”; Coojimans, “Monarch and Hydrarchs”, 3–9, 109–110, 209–33.

Small-scale raids

What counts as a small-scale raid is, of course, relative. There are no firm criteria for distinguishing it from major campaigns or attacks and in cases, categories may naturally overlap.⁹⁰² Subjectivity may be somewhat countered by comparing recorded attacks to each other in terms of the number of attackers or ships involved, but again there is no exact line above which a raid counts as large. However, in the case of Rus' attacks, there is a marked difference in magnitude between campaigns launched (allegedly) with sometimes more than a hundred ships, and raids conducted by a few or barely more than a dozen vessels (see Table 2). This divination is reinforced by the ambitions of the attacks: expeditions launched with larger multitudes usually aim at well-defended targets, such as Constantinople, or their motivations exceed robbing a sea-port or plundering the coastal countryside, for instance by aiming at more permanent occupation, as in the case of the seizure of Bardha'ah or Dorostolon. The severity of the incident is another possible factor, measured in the destruction caused or the opposition offered against the attack. For instance, the fierce fighting that aroused during the raid of 913 in the Caspian gives the event some note. The number of sources and the length of commemorations about the event usually also reinforces the distinction between the two forms of violent encounters. The last indication taken concerns the regularity of the action: more frequent means less scale probably. Based on this, there remain one or two attacks which may perhaps would fall into a category of 'medium-scale' raids, but I do not attribute much analytical value to this and I will discuss them here.

The following incidents, concretely treated and linked to a specific time period, shall be taken as small-scale raids conducted by the Rus'. In chronological sequence the first eastern raid must have occurred after c. 806, that is the death of Saint George of Amastris. His biography records a Rus' attempt to break through the Propontis then plunder Paphlagonia, finally arriving in Amastris where the saint's tomb was dug up by the invaders. According to the fanciful account, upon witnessing a miracle when opening the tomb, the Rus' decided to convert to Christianity and leave the churches unharmed.⁹⁰³ The date of the episode is insecure as it is not supplied in the account, the only indication remaining the death of Saint George himself in c. 806. Opinions vary, but most take the c. 830s as the most possible time of occurrence.⁹⁰⁴ Since the raid is not corroborated in any other sources its

⁹⁰² Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 15–6.

⁹⁰³ V. Vasilevskiy, *Russko-vizantiyskiye issledovaniya*, Vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Br. Pantegesikh Bereyskaya, 1893), 67–71; English translation: David Jenkins, Stefanos Alexopoulos, David Bachrach, Jonathan Couser, Sarah Davis, Darin Hayton and Andrea Sterk (trans.), *Life of St. George of Amastris*, (Notre Dame: 2001), 18–9. Online source: <https://library.nd.edu/byzantine_studies/documents/Amastris.pdf> [accessed: 02. 08. 2023]

⁹⁰⁴ E.g. Constantin Zuckerman, "Deux étapes dans la formation de l'ancien état russe", in *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, eds. Michel Kazanski, Anne Nersessian and Constantin Zuckerman (Paris: Éditions P. Lethielleux, 2000), 101; Cf. Treadgold arguing for 819: Warren Treadgold, "Three Byzantine Provinces and the First Byzantine Contacts with the Rus'", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12/13 (1988/89): 132–44. Even less secure is the

factuality is often disputed. Nevertheless, if authentic, it must be characterized as a smaller incident, judged by the inability of the Rus' to break through the entrance to the Propontis (the Sea of Azov or the Sea of Marmara) and the limited goals of plundering coastal settlements in a provincial area. That their main goal was the taking of slaves is perhaps suggested by the release of Greek prisoners upon turning of their palm to Christianity.⁹⁰⁵

Likewise dubious are the three (or two raids) recorded by the later Persian historian Ibn Isfandiyār, according to whom a Rus' fleet plundered Muslim settlements on the Caspian Sea coast during the reign of Al-Ḥasan ibn Zayd, emir of Tabaristan between 864 and 884. A similar attack took place in 911 and was repeated the following year:

“This year [911] 16 ships filled with Russians came to ‘Abasgún, as they had already done in the time of Sayyid Ḥasan b. Zayd, who defeated and slew them. This time they wasted and looted ‘Abasgún and the adjacent coasts, and carried off or slew many Musulmáns. Next year the Russians returned in greater force, burned Sárí and Panjáḥ-hazár, and carried off many prisoners. Then they sailed to Chashma-Rúd in Daylamán; but, while some of them were on land, a number of the people of Gílán descended to the sea-shore, burned their ships, and slew those who had landed. Shírwánsháh, King of the Khazars, hearing of this, intercepted such of their ships as had escaped and destroyed them and their crews, and thenceforth the marauding raids of the Russians were stopped.”⁹⁰⁶

Scholars have debated whether Ibn Isfandiyār refers to two or three Rus' raids since the last incident seems to be identical with the raid of 913 mentioned by Mas'ūdī, and there is even a chance that only Mas'ūdī's account is authentic, because of the late provenance of the account (c. 1217), Ibn Isfandiyār's confusion of the Shirwansah with the Khazar khagan, and finally the lack of control source material.⁹⁰⁷ Therefore, this last attack will be treated in the next section. The first two, however, seems modest enough by looting a somewhat prosperous but poorly defended merchant hub and the adjacent coast, and returning home with the booty.

occurrence of a raid conducted by a certain Bravlin (a Scandinavian judging by the name), which was only preserved in the fifteenth-century Life of St. Stephen of Sougdaia. For discussion of all these see, Alexander A. Vasiliev, *The Russian attack on Constantinople in 860* (Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1946), 71–89; George Vernadsky, “The Problem of the Early Russian Campaigns in the Black Sea Area”, *American Slavic and East European Review* 8, no. 1 (1949): 1–9.

⁹⁰⁵ Vasilevskiy, *Russko-vizantiyskiye issledovaniya*, 70.

⁹⁰⁶ Muhammad B. Al-Hasan B. Isfandiyar, *A History of Tabaristan*, ed. Edward G. Browne (Leiden: Brill, 1905), 199.

⁹⁰⁷ Samuel D. Margoliouth, “The Russian Seizure of Bardha'ah in 943 A.D.”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies University of London* 1, no. 2 (1918): 85–6; M. I. Artamonov, *Istoriya Khazar* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennyy Ermitazh, 1962), 370; A. N. Sakharov, *Diplomatiya Drevney Rusi* (Moscow: Mysl', 1980), 182–3, 199–202; L. N. Gumilyov, *Drevnyaya Rus' i Velikaya step'* (Moscow: Mysl', 1989), 191–2, 215–7.

The next attack falls into a somewhat ‘medium’ category I alluded to earlier. No numbers are supplied and the events are not fully corroborated in parallel sources. It was preserved in the Hebrew Schechter letter as part of the Jewish-Khazar correspondence of the 950s–960s. According to the complaints of the anonymous Khazar-Jewish writer, one night (on an imprecise date) a Rus’ fleet made a surprise attack on the Khazar town of Samkarch, presumably Tmutarakan, on the Black Sea coast. Upon hearing of the attack, the Khazars launched a counter-offensive and after four months of hard fighting were victorious due to the leadership of their commander, Petah, and regained all plundered treasures.⁹⁰⁸ According to the correspondence, the Byzantines urged the Rus’ to attack the Khazars, who, in the peace agreements, obliged the Rus’ to attack the Byzantines. The source tells how the Rus’ fleet suffered defeat from Byzantine Greek fire and that their leader, a certain (and still not conclusively identified) *HLGW*, perished later somewhere in Persia.⁹⁰⁹ Although the chronology of the event is hard to establish, most scholars (including myself) believe the raid took place in 941.⁹¹⁰ What is telling is the motivation behind the attack: plundering a sea-port and escaping before heavier engagement.

In 987, the Rus’ intended to enter the mercenary service of the Derbent Emir Maymūn ibn Aḥmad with eighteen ships. When discord arose with the local Muslims and the crew of a ship has been massacred, the rest decided to launch a retaliatory raid against Masqaṭ. After sacking the place, they proceeded to Sharvān and Mūqān, which they most likely also devastated.⁹¹¹ The same source accounts about another raid in 1032:

“In 423/1032 the amir Mansur with the ghazis of the Islamic "Centres" led a great expedition. This was because the Rus had raided (A 1058b) the territories of Sharvan, ruined and plundered them, and murdered or made prisoner a great mass of the inhabitants. As they were returning, their hands full of booty and captives, the ghazis of al-Bab and the Marches, with the amir Mansur at their head, occupied the defiles and the roads and put them to the sword so that few escaped. They took from their hands all the booty, animate and inanimate, which they had captured in Sharvan.”⁹¹²

⁹⁰⁸ Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew documents of the tenth century* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1982), 114–9.

⁹⁰⁹ Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew documents*, 118–9.

⁹¹⁰ For discussion, see: Constantin Zuckerman, “On the Date of the Khazars’ Conversion to Judaism and the Chronology of the Kings of the Rus Oleg and Igor. A Study of the Anonymous Khazar Letter from the Genizah of Kairo”, *Revue des études byzantines* 53 (1995): 237–70.

⁹¹¹ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 19 (Arabic).

⁹¹² Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 47 (Arabic: 20–1).

Although the source recording the event has been preserved only in a very late Turkish compilation, it stems from the anonymous history of Derbent (*Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb*) produced in the eleventh century (or latest in 1106). Thus, its contemporaneity is not in doubt and the raids' factuality has never been questioned despite being solitary mentions on Rus' activities here. This scholarly attitude is in slight contrast to the raids treated above and we shall return to it shortly.

So far, the number of raids does not seem much, especially when compared with raids in the West, which seem quite numerous. In addition, even out of this few, doubts have been cast on the authenticity of some. Is it really a case that the Rus' did rarely conduct small-scale raids in the East?

I would like to discuss casual mentions of Rus' raids in Muslim sources which cannot be linked to precise dates. This is, for instance, what we read by Ibn Rusta: "The Rūs raid the Saqāliba, sailing in their ships until they come upon them. They take them captive and sell them in Khazarān and Bulkār (Bulghār). They have no cultivated fields and they live by pillaging the land of the Saqāliba."⁹¹³ Following up on the late-ninth-century report of the 'Anonymous Relation' from whom Ibn Rusta borrowed this passage, later Muslim authors likewise repeat the same information borrowing from Jayhānī.⁹¹⁴ Although the 'Anonymous Relation' did not supply us with particular details and dates for these events, the passage unequivocally bespeaks of the regularity of these raids against the Saqāliba in the 870s and possibly much earlier. The *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam* generalizes in an identical way when saying that the Rus' wage war on their neighbours and always come out victorious.⁹¹⁵ This regularity is reinforced by the Rus' envoys' complaint to the Khwarazmshah saying that after their Christianization they could not continue raiding which was the basis of their former livelihood.⁹¹⁶

Another similar case is reported by the thirteenth-century Dimashqī, who built on previous intelligence: "They [the Rus' – my addition] have islands in the Mānīṭas Sea, which they inhabit; and they have warships (*marākib ḥarbīya*), on which they wage war against the Khazars."⁹¹⁷ One may wonder about the scale and effectiveness of these raids on 'warships' from the small islands of the Azov Sea. If authentic, the account is revealing; from the safety of the Azov Sea islands the Rus' could have raided the Khazar periphery successfully and then withdrawn to the open sea, where the Khazars, having no fleet, could not pursue them. Also, in around the mid-tenth century, Khagan Joseph of the Khazars reported the followings concerning the Rus' in a letter to Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut, a fellow Jew serving in the Ummayyad Caliphate of Al-Andalus in 960:

⁹¹³ Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 126; original: BGA I–7, 145.

⁹¹⁴ Göckenjan and Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte*, 81–2, 180, 234, 253.

⁹¹⁵ Bosworth, *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, 159.

⁹¹⁶ Minorsky (trans.), *Marvazī on China, the Turks and India*, 23, 36.

⁹¹⁷ Chems-ed-Din Abdallah Mohammed ed-Dimichqui, *Cosmographie*, ed. August Ferdinand Mehren (St. Petersburg: Académie impériale des sciences, 1866), 262; translation by István Lánckzy. Arabic addition mine.

“I protect the mouth of the river (Itil – Volga, V.P.) and prevent the Rus arriving in their ships from setting off by sea against the Ishmaelites (Moslems – V.P.) and (equally) all (their) enemies from setting off by land to Bab (‘the Gate’, Derbent – V.P.). I wage war with them. If I left them (in peace) for a single hour they would crush the whole land of the Ishmaelites up to Baghdad.”⁹¹⁸

This, again, seems to be a fairly regular encounter at this time: the Rus’ aiming to break through and raid in the Caspian Sea.

These isolated reports prompt us not to underestimate the frequency of Rus’ raids in comparison to those of the viking raids in the West. There are several reasons for this. The majority of sources which bespeak of viking activity in the West comes from annals or sources structured similarly along firm dates, like the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* documenting events year by year. It is not surprising, therefore that local and smaller affairs are more regularly preserved. Even there, discrepancies between recorded events are detectable: a raid is sometimes only written down in one – out of many – annals, and when events are recorded parallel, their dating and details often differ.⁹¹⁹

Islamic geographical literature was structured totally differently. First of all, the majority of recorded raids were outside their scope of vision, and secondly, they present them in more general terms; actually talking about the *lifestyle* of these foreign people. Thus, raiding the Slavs was a regular occupation of the Rus’ most likely performed every single year by multiple groups. Regular encounters with other neighbours also received some hints in the records presented above.

Byzantine sources roll the same way. Take for instance Constantine Porphyrogenitus’ *De administrando imperio*. The emperor presents ample and detailed knowledge about Rus’ commercial interaction with Byzantium, their itinerary and doings in their home country. He indirectly confirms the regular occurrence of Rus’ raids against the Slavs as ship caravans loaded with slaves were reaching the Byzantine capital annually according to him. This fresh supply of slaves must have been upheld somehow. Yet, Constantine never alludes to the Rus’ raids against Constantinople that he must have witnessed during his lifetime, even though the attacks of 941 and 944 were particularly large undertakings. This, of course, does not mean that Constantine had no knowledge about these raids. He is similarly ignorant about the Magyar raids against Byzantium in 934 and 943, even though he is the only source recording the early dynastic history of the Magyars in a coherent narrative. This

⁹¹⁸ Quoted in: Vladimir Petrukhin, “Khazaria and Rus’: An Examination of their Historical Relations”, in *The World of the Khazars. New Perspectives Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Khazar Colloquium*, eds. Peter B. Golden, Haggai Ben-Shammai and András Róna-Tas (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 257; original: P. K. Kokovtsov, *Yevreysko-khazarskaya perepiska v X veke* (Leningrad: Izd. Ak. Nauk, 1932), 83–4, 102.

⁹¹⁹ It is enough to mention the sometimes conflicting narratives of the *Annales Bertiniani* and *Annales Fuldenses*. Smaller annals sometimes also report local affairs unmentioned in the main sources. Cséte Katona: “Fuldai évkönyv (828–901)” [review article] *Századok* 157, no. 4 (2023): 815–7.

information just probably did not fit into the genre and intentions of his work. The DAI was pasted together from various sources – including reports of diplomats, foreign envoys arriving in court, former historical works and documents of the Byzantine archives. It was a handbook of foreign affairs, yet probably never intended to present events systematically. If even the large attacks are missing from such major historical works, no wonder that small-scale raids evaded the attention of major chroniclers. Thus, the raid on Amastris, for instance, should not be condemned as false report just by the lack of further chronicle support “given the thinness of their coverage of events in the provinces” as aptly remarked by Franklin and Shepard.⁹²⁰

This comment leads back to the mentioning of Rus’ raids in Muslim historiography. These works are not of the general nature of travel literature, but local histories written by eminent local men. Such is the case with the *Ta’rīkh Bāb al-abwāb*. Ibn Isfandiyār, a native of Tabaristan, should be perhaps more easily excused of fallacies. Naturally there is confusion in his work regarding the number and date of the raids due to his work’s late provenance, but where would otherwise such minor incidents be preserved more authentically than in local histories which are fed on the local’s memory – oral or written – upholding their own experience? Yes, when a major incident occurred it did usually not escape the vision of history writers elsewhere, shown by Mas’ūdī’s detailed report of the raid in 913.

To conclude, I propose that the difference between the number of western and eastern viking raids is to be sought in source preservation not in historical reality. The known Rus’ operations against Byzantium and the Caspian Muslim territories, which are in fact recorded with a date, therefore should be supplemented with more regularly occurring raids against the Slavs, Baltic, Finno-Ugrian and perhaps steppe people (from the mid tenth-century). Accordingly, the number of raids significantly increases.

Major campaigns

Thanks to their technological advancement and experience in naval warfare and seafaring, the Scandinavian Rus’ were able to travel far beyond their immediate territory where water systems allowed. They also seem to have possessed horses in adequate numbers – either within their own ranks or supplied by nomadic allies – to coordinate large attacks on land towards far-away targets. Major campaigns were launched against three clearly separable abodes: Byzantium, the Caspian Muslim territories and Ummayyad Al-Andalus. Only one, maybe two, instances are known when the target of a major Rus’ campaign was directed against steppe people.

⁹²⁰ Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus’*, 31.

The Rus' targeted Constantinople and its hinterland in 860, 907, 941, 944 and 1043, whilst in 967/8–971 a large-scale Rus' campaign in the Balkans had to be halted in Bulgaria by the imperial army in open and siege battles. All of these assaults are confirmed by independent sources, except the one in 907, but Georg Ostrogorsky demonstrated that doubts should not necessarily be cast on the historical veracity of this event.⁹²¹

Muslim settlements along the coast of the Caspian were plundered in 913, Bardha'ah was occupied and held for months in 943, and al-Bāb was the aim of a joint Alan-Rus' campaign in 1033, probably launched as a retaliation for the defeat of a smaller host a year earlier. These were all recorded in trustworthy Muslim accounts and some other (e.g. Georgian) source material. If the late medieval legendary saga of Yngvarr the Far-Traveller has a historical core (strengthened by dozens of eleventh-century runestones), an unprecedentedly large campaign was launched from Sweden in around 1042 to perish in *Serkland*, the Old Norse word used most probably for Muslim territories.⁹²²

The most insecure information pertaining to Rus' raids concerns Al-Andalus. According to several contemporary Muslim accounts, the Umayyad emirate and later caliphate was attacked by the Rus'.⁹²³ The first author who reports about this is the Baghdadian scholar al-Ya'qūbī. He states that in 844 Seville was sacked by the *majūs*, a term used for Zoroastrians or pagans in general, whom he this time identifies with the Rus'.⁹²⁴ Al-Ya'qūbī's *Kitāb al-Buldān* (*Book of Countries*) was finished in 891 thus counts as near-contemporary to the event. However, later Muslim authors building on miscellaneous earlier information do not identify the attackers as Rus', but either simply as *majūs* or specifically as Normans.⁹²⁵ According to some, this aligns better with information from the *Annales Bertiniani*'s report of the same year mentioning a 'Norman' raid on Spain starting off from the Garonne and descending on Al-Andalus from the East.⁹²⁶ However, it should be remarked that other contemporary Muslim writers also states that Al-Andalus was raided exactly by the Rus'. Ibn Ḥawqal, a personal visitor to Al-Andalus, claims that the Rus' attacked on multiple occasions during the reign of 'Abd al-Rahmān III (912–61),⁹²⁷ from which one in 913 is concretely mentioned also by Mas'ūdī, who thought that the Rus' arrived through the channel connecting the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea.⁹²⁸ Finally, Ibn Ḥawqal notes that after the despoiling of Khazaria (in 969 according to him), the

⁹²¹ George Ostrogorsky, "L'expédition du prince Oleg contre Constantinople en 907", *Annales de l'Institut Kondakov* 11 (1940): 47–62.

⁹²² "Yngvars saga víðförla", in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 2, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 423–59.

⁹²³ Golden, "Rūs", 619.

⁹²⁴ BGA I–7, 354.

⁹²⁵ Cf. Shinakov and Fedosov, "The Geopolitical Context of the Rus' Raid on Seville", 7–9.

⁹²⁶ *Annales Bertiniani*, 32.

⁹²⁷ BGA II–1, 113.

⁹²⁸ Maçoudi, *Les praires d'or*, Vol. 1, eds. and trans. C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, Collection d'ouvrages orientaux publiées par le Société Asiatique. Paris: A L'imprimerie Impériale, 1861), 364–5.

Rus' split up into two groups and ravaged Byzantium (*Rūm*), and *Al-Āndalus*.⁹²⁹ Al-Bakrī probably copied Mas'ūdī and only adds a general note about the Rus' being island- and ship-dwellers, who regularly attacked Al-Andalus on 200 ships.⁹³⁰ The case is thus ambivalent: a handful of otherwise trustworthy and near-contemporary authors expressed the opinion that the Rus' attacked Al-Andalus on several occasions, however, given the unusual target and the logistical pitfalls of such undertakings, there is a good chance that Muslim observers simply could not differentiate the Rus' from Scandinavian vikings and confused the information. Recently, a newer study attempted to dissolve the contradiction with the argument that the Rus' were identical with the Swedes to contemporary observers. Given the interconnectedness of the viking world, attacks could be launched on Al-Andalus from Scandinavia or viking bases in Frankia by people regarded as Rus', otherwise well-known to both Muslims and Christians on the continent at the time.⁹³¹ Despite that the information is puzzling, it should perhaps not be outright rejected that even Al-Andalus was on the radar of Rus' military operations.

The steppe, on the other hand, was barely on the mark of Rus' armies, except from Sviatoslav's devastating campaign against Khazaria in 965. The one launched by Vladimir against the Volga Bulgars in 985 could be added to this, but no scale is provided in the PVL for the campaign.

The campaigns mentioned were markedly different from small-scale raids (cf. *Table 2.*). This is indicated by several, sometimes coalescing, factors, such as the aims of the expeditions, the recorded number of ships or men (when available), the large-scale levying of troops from a vast array of subjugated people, the frequent inclusion of nomadic allies within Rus' armies, and their combined operation on land and sea. All these imply logistical complexities which were somehow mitigated by the Rus'. Even though the sources are taciturn on the details, western viking activity is once more a useful mirror in this regard. Rather than treating these attacks one by one, the information from the sources will be pulled together to highlight the themes mentioned above.

The most evident indication is naturally the numbers of Rus' armies involved in these encounters. Several sources supply numbers, however, it would be foolish to take their testimony at face value. As Guy Halsall rightly notes, no medieval authors "ever went and counted an army",⁹³² which alone makes the data questionable. In addition, most of the accounts in the sources were not even produced by eyewitnesses of the armed clash or by military men. Medieval authors' tendencies to magnify army numbers are well-known. Historians have a tendency to accept relatively small army numbers as

⁹²⁹ BGA II–1, 15.

⁹³⁰ Adrian P. Van Leeuwen and André Ferre (eds.), *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-al-mamālik* by Abū 'Ubayd 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz Bakrī (Qartāj: Bayt al-Ḥikmah al-Dār al-'Arabīyah lil-Kitāb, 1992), 264.

⁹³¹ Shinakov and Fedosov, "The Geopolitical Context of the Rus' Raid on Seville".

⁹³² Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 121.

authentic and larger ones as non-sensible, even if it is the same author who supplies the data.⁹³³ I am not convinced that this process is methodologically well-grounded. It is true that the information to be inferred relatively safely from the accounts is far from precise, but it still makes it possible to estimate an army's size as 'small' or 'large', which is most useful to examine the socio-political context of the encounters.⁹³⁴

According to available evidence, Scandinavian Rus' armies in the period varied from raiding parties of a few ships' crews to tens of thousands of men levied from subordinate Slavic, Baltic and Finno-Ugric tribes, and supplied by nomadic allies. Smaller raiding parties or armies mentioned earlier, such as the 16 ships plundering the Caspian coast, as recorded by Ibn Isfandiyyār,⁹³⁵ or the 18 ships mentioned in the history of Sharvan and Derbent in 987,⁹³⁶ are visibly smaller than those listed here.

As said, however, the sizes of larger Scandinavian Rus' armies seem excessively magnified in a first glance at medieval accounts. What to make of Rus' ship numbers in the PVL, for instance? Askold and Dir led 200 ships against the Byzantines in 866 (correctly 860), Oleg 2,000 in 907 and Igor 10,000 in 941.⁹³⁷ The number of ships of the attackers in 860 is a rare example confirmed by other sources, although Joannēs Diaconus provides an even larger number of 360 ships.⁹³⁸ Pertaining to Oleg's time, the chronicler even provides the necessary multiplier to estimate the size of the army: a crew of 40 men per ship.⁹³⁹ According to this calculation, Oleg was advancing towards Constantinople with 80,000 people. Such a number is so unreliably large that it is impossible to accept it. Although there is no way to know what kind of a conglomeration of boats really made up this fleet, viking ship standards of the period hardly exceeded the norm of 30 people per vessel, and the types of watercrafts utilized on Russian waterways could be even smaller.⁹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, such enterprises definitely conveyed the impression of greatness; Liutprand of Cremona's more modest estimate than the PVL's 10,000, still counted "a thousand and more ships" advancing on Constantinople in 941.⁹⁴¹

⁹³³ Timothy Reuter, "The recruitment of armies in the Early Middle Ages: what can we know?", in *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, AD 1–1300*, eds. Anne Nørgård Jørgensen and Birthe L. Clausen (Copenhagen: PNM, 1997), 36.

⁹³⁴ Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 119–24.

⁹³⁵ Isfandiyyār, *A History of Tabaristan*, 199.

⁹³⁶ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 19 (Arabic).

⁹³⁷ PVL 13, 16, 22.

⁹³⁸ Cf. Vasiliev, *The Russian attack on Constantinople*, 101–2, 189; Georg Heinrich Pertz (ed.), *Iohannis Diaconi Chronicon Venetum et Gradense*, MGH SS. Vol. 7 (Hannover: Hahn, 1846), 18.

⁹³⁹ PVL 16.

⁹⁴⁰ Anne Stalsberg, "Scandinavian Viking-Age Boat Graves in Old Rus'." *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 28, no. 1–4 (2001): 359–401; Gunilla Larsson, "Early Contacts between Scandinavia and the Orient", *Silk Road* 9 (2011): 123, 128–30; Vasiliev, *The Russian attack on Constantinople*, 190–2; Shepard, "Photios' sermons on the Rus attack of 860", 117–8.

⁹⁴¹ Paolo Squatriti (trans.), *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 179; original: Liudprand of Cremona, *Antapodosis* V, ed. Paolo Chiesa (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 131.

Mas'ūdī reports a similarly large-scale incident. For the Caspian Rus' raid, he recorded a comparably large Rus' army that was launched in 913 on 500 ships, each carrying a crew of one hundred.⁹⁴² Regardless of the possible carrying capacities, hundreds of ships plundering far and wide on the Caspian Sea coast for months suggests a considerable enterprise, something comparable to the massive attacks on the Byzantine coastline and capital. Even though its authenticity cannot be confirmed, Al-Bakrī's note of 200 Rus' ships ascending on Al-Andalus fits into this pattern.⁹⁴³ Skylitzēs also regards Sviatoslav's Balkan army enormously large: numbering 308,000 people, according to him.⁹⁴⁴ The PVL states that Sviatoslav's own troops numbered 10,000,⁹⁴⁵ which is many fewer than in the Byzantine records, which note from 15,000 to 60,000 troops at different stages of the campaign. Leo the Deacon estimated the Rus' army to be 15,500 strong at Preslav and 60,000 strong at Dorostolon.⁹⁴⁶ Skylitzēs gives a similar number for Preslav (16,500), but an unusually high number for Dorostolon: 330,000. This contrasts with the numbers he reported previously: 308,000 for the whole alliance.⁹⁴⁷

Although the figures and possibly also the multipliers for ships' crews were exaggerated, I have no reservations about accepting that even if not tens of thousands of men, armies attacking the Byzantine capital and successfully forcing one of the contemporary superpowers to peace treaties, were huge. Muslim territories were likewise well-organized and presented firm obstacles. Thus, I see no reason to dismiss the core of the information: Rus' armies were sometimes exceptionally large. The opponents being threatened were far more powerful than Wessex or a fragmented Frankia. The fact that militarily advanced societies in command of large fighting units joined together were matched, shows that Scandinavian Rus' leaders were able to amass, mobilize and control huge numbers. The seriousness of these assaults is also demonstrated by the fact that they were commemorated in writing at great length: Patriarch Photius dedicated two sermons to commemorating the devastating Rus' raid in 860,⁹⁴⁸ whilst Mas'ūdī devoted multiple pages to the Caspian incursion of 913.⁹⁴⁹ Prince Sviatoslav's campaigns are further examples that strengthen the point that outsized Rus' armies posed an imminent danger to the Byzantine Empire.

⁹⁴² Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 18.

⁹⁴³ Van Leeuwen and Ferre (eds.), *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-al-mamālik*, 264.

⁹⁴⁴ Hans Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, CFHB Series Berolinensis, no. 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973), 288.

⁹⁴⁵ PVL 33.

⁹⁴⁶ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 134–40, 156–7.

⁹⁴⁷ Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Scylitzae*, 288–300. For various scholarly reconstructions of the army sizes, see: Walter K. Hanak, "The Infamous Svjatoslav: Master of Duplicity in War and Peace?", in *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S. J.*, eds. Timothy S. Miller and John Nesbitt (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 141–5.

⁹⁴⁸ Photius, "De Rossorum incursione homoliæ duæ".

⁹⁴⁹ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 18–25.

How in theory an early medieval army *could be* put together was explored by Timothy Reuter, who remained skeptical about whether the theory applies to how specific armies *were* actually assembled.⁹⁵⁰ The period saw in principle four overlapping categories from which rulers could draw manpower. These include the personal household, or permanent military following of rulers, even smaller ones including *jarls*, Frankish princes, Eastern European dukes, bishops, etc. This somewhat contrasts with a second mode of acquiring troops: hiring mercenaries. Foreigners received payment in professional kingly (princely) or imperial armies, often as bodyguards. A third option is to levy troops through vassalage in exchange for fiefs, a feature contested to be characteristic already for the early middle ages, although instances might have indeed occurred especially in Anglo-Saxon England, Carolingian Frankia and Ottonian Germany. A last possibility was to forcefully conscript smallholding peasants into the army in times of crisis, this, however, was probably not a very frequent solution unless the locality's defence called for it. The meagre textual information on how Rus' armies were assembled should be illuminated better with the analogy of western viking hosts.

Comparative data from the western viking territories supports the relative sizes of the Rus' armies and helps explain the socio-political background of assembling powerful forces. There has been a long-held debate about the possible sizes of viking marauding warbands and armies. The most influential theorists in the debate were Peter Sawyer and Nicholas Brooks, who both oppositely saw the question. Sawyer argued that exaggerated army and ship numbers in western accounts had to be disregarded and as consequence, viking armies consisted a few hundred men only, even the largest ones barely exceeding a thousand men. Brook, taking the viking hosts in England under scrutiny, however, illustrated that such low numbers do not correspond to the historical realities of the time, an opinion shared also by newer generations of scholars.⁹⁵¹ However, not even the most optimist estimates argued for viking armies being larger than low thousands.⁹⁵² This has been challenged recently by employing a different methodology: hitherto written sources enjoyed preference, but new archaeological investigations indicate different proportions.

New research on the Great Viking Army of the mid-ninth century suggests that the size of this exceptional force has been greatly under-estimated previously.⁹⁵³ According to recent archaeological fieldwork on winter camps where the Great Army bivouacked, the camps were even larger than Scandinavian towns of the period. The Torksey camp, for instance, stretched over 55 hectares and could house 4,000–5,000 people, but most likely more.⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁵⁰ Reuter, "The recruitment of armies in the Early Middle Ages". See also Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, 71–116.

⁹⁵¹ Nicholas P. Brooks, "England in the Ninth Century: The Crucible of Defeat", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29 (1979): 1–20.

⁹⁵² For a short summary, see: Raffield, "Bands of brothers", 309.

⁹⁵³ Hadley and Richards, *The Viking Great Army*, 69–71.

⁹⁵⁴ Hadley and Richards, *The Viking Great Army*, 109–10.

Our knowledge of the know-how of the organization of such a force has increased in recent decades; the scholarly view now challenges the homogenous nature of Scandinavian warbands and argues that their organization was highly complex. Retinues of various size, called *lið* in Scandinavia, were bound to each other by ties of kinship and sworn to a leader. Enlarging such a unit required adding men from outside groups, non-relatives and even people from abroad.⁹⁵⁵ An army had to be recruited and organized on a supra-regional level, including forced conscripts, mercenaries and allies from other ethnic milieus. Stable isotope analysis conducted on the dead of the Repton cemetery showed that members of the Great Army were not only recruited from Scandinavia. Some arrived from the North Atlantic islands, the Baltics and Russia. The army even included the ‘traditional’ enemies of vikings: Anglo-Saxons, Franks and Frisians.⁹⁵⁶ The examination of a mass grave near Weymouth (Dorset) at Ridgeway Hill yielded similar results. The tenth-century grave contained 52 decapitated men, probably vikings, among whom only 38 arrived from outside the British Isles to loot in England.⁹⁵⁷ Armies in the homelands were also inclusive. Isotopes of the dead buried in the cemetery of the Danish ring fort, Trelleborg indicates that men in the army of Haraldr *blátönn* (‘bluetooth’) mainly came from Norway and the Slavic areas adjacent to Denmark, possibly from the Obodrites.⁹⁵⁸ As discussed in the previous chapters, the steppe impact is detectable in the material culture of Birka and other Swedish sites. In addition, viking armies were not solely inclusive in ethnic, but also social terms. As Benjamin Raffield argues, in some of the larger armies that went on long campaigns members also engaged in craft production and trade to supply themselves. Some of the tasks were performed by women and children, making the armies more ‘mobile societies’ or even ‘polities’.⁹⁵⁹ Thus, such a vast force as the Great Army included women, children and slaves and was assembled from all areas of the viking diaspora, even some territories under viking threat.

Some of these patterns look quite applicable to Rus’ armies levying troops and forging alliances over a wide socio-political arena relatively under control. Scandinavian warbands arriving in the east soon mixed with local people, and large campaigns were launched with the help of a multitude of allies of Slavic and Balto-Finn origin. Prince Oleg, for instance, as early as the 880s, is described as setting forth towards the south, “taking with him many warriors from among the Varangians, the

⁹⁵⁵ Raffield et al., “Ingroup identification”, 38–40; Hedenstierna-Jonson, “Warrior identities”, 179, 183–4.

⁹⁵⁶ Paul Budd, Andrew Millard, Carolyn Chenery, Sam Lucy, and Charlotte Roberts, “Investigating Population Movement by Stable Isotope Analysis: A Report from Britain”, *Antiquity* 78, no. 299 (2004): 137–8; Raffield, “Bands of brothers”, 325.

⁹⁵⁷ Carolyn Chenery, Angela Lamb, Jane Evans, Hilary Sloane, and Carlyn Stewart “Appendix 3: Isotope Analysis of Individuals from the Ridgeway Hill Mass Grave”, in *Given to the Ground: A Viking Age Mass Grave on Ridgeway Hill, Weymouth*, eds. Louis Loe, Angela Boyle, Helen Webb, and David Score (Dorchester: Oxford Archaeology, 2014), 259–84.

⁹⁵⁸ Douglas T. Price, Karin Margarita Frei, Andres Siegfried Dobat, Niels Lynnerup and Pia Bennike, “Who was in Harold Bluetooth’s army? Strontium isotope investigation of the cemetery at the Viking Age fortress at Trelleborg, Denmark”, *Antiquity* 85, no. 328 (2011): 476–89.

⁹⁵⁹ Raffield, “Bands of brothers”.

Chuds, the Slavs, the Merians and all the Krivichians”.⁹⁶⁰ According to the PVL, similar mustering was also carried out before later campaigns. In 907, he was said to leave Kiev with a “multitude of Varangians, Slavs, Chuds, Krivichians, Merians, Polynians, Severians, Derevlans, Radimichians, Croats, Dulebians, and Tivercians”, a list to be shortened to Varangians, Rus’, Polynians, Slavs, Krivichians, Tivercians and Pechenegs for Igor’s campaign of 944.⁹⁶¹ Based on similarities with the West, there is no need to discredit the general picture provided by the chronicle.

Admitting other groups into the Rus’ warrior elite added further complexity to the social organization. The military leadership and small retinues were still mainly Scandinavian in character even after the mid-tenth century, but as seen by the list of Rus’ leaders enumerated as oath-takers after Rus’-Byzantine treaties, local names started to appear among their ranks.⁹⁶² Thus, comparable socio-military structures existed in both Scandinavia and the Rus’ territories, armed units were ethnically heterogenous allowing a larger-scale recruit.

More importantly, in many cases it was the nomads who increased the size of Rus’ armies. Although undoubtedly exaggerated, the main message of Skylitzés noted above is probably correct: nomads were the bulk of the Rus’ during Sviatoslav’s Balkan campaign. The wording of the peace treaty between Sviatoslav and the Byzantines in 971 backs this up indirectly. Since the Byzantine–Rus’ peace treaties are genuine information copied by the chronicler from Greek originals, no doubt the clause forbidding Sviatoslav to attack with his own Rus’ warriors or to hire “foreign mercenaries” against the empire means that this was viewed as a real danger.⁹⁶³ The Pecheneg presence in Igor’s campaigns probably also provided considerable manpower. They probably also supported Oleg in 907, as the chronicle reports that he led his people towards Constantinople “by horse and by ship”, the same way as Igor did in 944 when he was allied with them.⁹⁶⁴ Thus, the huge Rus’ army of 860 that attacked Constantinople, perhaps advancing slowly southwards and living off the land as a mobile society, can usefully be compared with the Great Viking Army that operated in England at roughly the same time.⁹⁶⁵

There is a further indication that, although the numbers were rounded up and magnified by later medieval authors, they did not *de facto* lie about the magnitudes of the enterprises. This becomes

⁹⁶⁰ RPC 60–1; PVL 14.

⁹⁶¹ RPC 64; PVL 16, 23.

⁹⁶² Bohdan Struminski, *Linguistic Interrelations in Early Rus’: Northmen, Finns and East Slavs (Ninth to Eleventh Centuries)* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1996), 162–80; Alexander Sitzmann, *Nordgermanisch-ostslavische Sprachkontakte in der Kiever Rus’ bis zum Tode Jaroslavs des Weisen* (Vienna: Praesens Verlag, 2003), 58–61; Elena Mel’nikova, “The List of Old Norse Personal Names in the Russian–Byzantine Treaties of the tenth century”, *Studia anthropomynica scandinavica: Tidskrift för nordisk personnamnsforskning* (2004): 5–27.

⁹⁶³ RPC 89; PVL 34.

⁹⁶⁴ RPC 64, 72; PVL 16, 23.

⁹⁶⁵ Oleksiy Tolochko, *Ocherki nachal’noi Rusi* (Kiev: Laurus, 2015), 142–9.

apparent when we compare the size of smaller units and the organizational model of Rus' armies with those of the western viking activities.

The Rus' force attacking Bardha'ah in 943 is not likely to have exceeded a few thousand Rus'. According to the account, 700 Rus' were killed in the campaign and 300 more waited for their fleeing comrades on their ships anchored at the Kur River. This means that the Rus' force was larger than 1,000 people. That even 30,000 Muslims were unable to retake the town by siege implies that the Rus' were perhaps more numerous. Previously, however, Salar Marzubān had dared to attack them with only 5,000 soldiers,⁹⁶⁶ which suggests that the Rus' hardly numbered more than a few thousand in total, which is a sensible number for a larger undertaking also in the West. Next, Scandinavian Rus' warbands enslaving the Slavs and taking their provisions for themselves moved around in "bands of a hundred or two hundred", according to Gardīzī.⁹⁶⁷ The Caspian Rus' army of 913 operated in small military detachments or raiding parties called *sarāyā* (sing. *sarīya*), used in Muslim documents to refer to groups never exceeding a few hundred warriors.⁹⁶⁸ These numbers correspond to the standards of smaller western viking fleets or warbands,⁹⁶⁹ and support the veracity of at least some of the contemporary (or near contemporary) accounts mentioning Rus' warband or army sizes.

As argued on the basis of western viking examples, small detachments of a large army could manoeuvre independently, which made it easier to gather large contingents in a relatively short time, but also hindered large armies from holding together for a long period. Neil Price saw viking hosts as 'hydrarchies', independent landless polities on the analogy of early modern pirate communities. Pirate (and viking) hydrarchies were small, but autonomous political entities pursuing their self-interest, for which they readily allied themselves with similar groups for the time being.⁹⁷⁰ The motor of this vehicle was the independent and flexible unit of the Scandinavian retinue, the *lið* (or the Russian *družina*) commanded by a charismatic leader. Individual leaders of larger Rus' contingents surface in the name lists of Byzantine-Rus' peace treaties. Twenty-five names are enumerated in the year 945, some of whom sent his envoy to witness the treaty.⁹⁷¹ It is quite unlikely that these individuals represented Oleg's or Igor's personal retinues, as it makes little sense to struck deals with all the rank and file of an enemy bodyguard. The treaties' original Greek wording most probably used the word *archon* ('leader') for these named *knyazes* and *boyars*. Petr S. Stefanovich compared the list

⁹⁶⁶ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 62–7.

⁹⁶⁷ Martinez, "Gardīzī's two chapters", 169.

⁹⁶⁸ Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Vol. 4 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1872), 1356.

⁹⁶⁹ see, for instance, Carroll Gillmor, "War on the rivers: Viking numbers and mobility on the Seine and Loire, 841–886", *Viator* 19 (1988): 79–109; Janet L. Nelson, "The Frankish Empire", in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.

⁹⁷⁰ Neil Price, "Ship-Men and Slaughter-Wolves. Pirate Politics in the Viking Age", in *Persistent Piracy. Maritime Violence and State-Formation in Global Historical Perspective*, eds. Stefan Eklöf Amirell and Leos Müller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 51–68.

⁹⁷¹ PVL 23.

of names with information on Rus' society gained from Constantine's *De Ceremoniis* and found that it depicts a similar social structure, i.e. the Rus' were led by 25 independent *archons*, only a few of them related by kin. Thus, it is much more sensible that individual commanders of personal *lið*'s, ships crews, or petty-kings ruling in semi-dependence from the Kievan prince, all had to consent to the treaties as their allegiance to the Rus' princes was based on rather loose bonds of reciprocal friendship or patron-client relationship.⁹⁷² Thus, larger Rus' armies were effectively mobile due to the personal following of individual war leaders.

Mas'ūdī provides further comparative evidence on the 913 Rus' force plundering along the Caspian Sea coast. After entering the sea, the Rus' spread out into several independent raiding parties that attacked Jil, Daylam, Tabaristan, Abaskun and Azerbaijan simultaneously. They stayed in the region for several months in temporary headquarters established in the safety of the Caspian islands, only to re-group later and finally sail away.⁹⁷³ This Rus' force operated much like viking armies did in England and on the continent,⁹⁷⁴ based on the ability of individual *lið*s breaking off the main army, operating on its own and re-group later. The *sarāyā* of the Caspian Rus' army of 913 is also revealing: as said they consisted of topmost a few hundred men. This Muslim word choice may be paired with the Latin *sodalitates*, that is 'brotherhoods', employed by western chroniclers to smaller viking groups of a larger force operating on their own.⁹⁷⁵

Unique conditions of viking activity in the East

Aside Byzantium and the Islamic Caliphates, there was also another group of players in the East, who hindered aggressive Rus' undertakings. Any raid or large-scale assault directed towards the fertile regions of the south was thwarted by the Eastern European branch of the Eurasian steppe belt. Rus' commercial or pirate fleets tried to reach a destination beyond nomadic habitats, mainly through waterways that traversed the steppes. A target area under Muslim control could be reached via the Don, Volga, Caspian and a Byzantine target area via the Dnieper and the Black Sea. In the Volga area, the Khazars, in the Dnieper area, first the Magyars and later the Pechenegs, hindered passage. Rus' fleets elicited varied reactions from the steppe people and they had to be neutralized in order to let the expedition through. This presented an additional potential danger for Rus' raiding parties or armies.

⁹⁷² Petr S. Stefanovich, "The Political Organization of Rus' in the 10th Century", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 64, no. 4 (2016): 529–44.

⁹⁷³ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 21–2.

⁹⁷⁴ Raffield, "Bands of brothers", 324–6.

⁹⁷⁵ *Annales Bertiniani*, 56.

The Khazars, the most complex of the steppe societies in the era, established a blockade protected by strongholds at the confluence of the Volga and Don rivers, most notably Sarkel built with Byzantine help.⁹⁷⁶ The blockade let pirates slip through claiming a portion of the expected booty, as noted in the mid-tenth century by Masʿūdī:

When the Rūs vessels reached the Khazar checkpoint that guards the entrance to the strait, they sent to ask the king for permission to cross his kingdom and make their way down the river of the Khazars and so enter the Khazar Sea (Caspian Sea). The Rūs contracted to give the king half of anything they managed to pillage from the people along the shores of that sea. The ruler agreed to their request and they entered the strait.⁹⁷⁷

The mission of 913 that is referred to in this quotation ended badly, as Muslim subjects of the Khazars turned against the returning Rus' fleet and massacred its members.⁹⁷⁸ The blockade was still in operation later in the tenth century, as Khagan Joseph reported in his letter to Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut quoted above. The evidence just introduced serves to underline that the Rus' must have had to somehow deal with the matter, adding further complexities to carry out raids or larger attacks. We do not know how this was handled during the attack on Bardha'ah in 943, which is the only secure exception from the rule. Other Rus' attacks that entered the Caspian without hostilities, like the ones recorded by Ibn Isfandiyyār (if they are authentic) were probably conducted before the erection of the Khazar blockade system. Pressure probably eased after the fall of the Khazar Khaganate. Even if we do not know whether their intention was peaceful or warlike, it seems that in 987 a fleet of 18 Rus' ships passed undisturbed into the Caspian when summoned by the Derbent emir Maymūn ibn Aḥmad.⁹⁷⁹ Also, in 1035 a Rus' fleet was comfortably rowing the waters of the Caspian, as the Ghaznavid ruler Masʿūd ibn Muḥammad noted during a picnic on the southern shore.⁹⁸⁰

The Volga could be reached from the Don, and navigation was easy on both rivers, but the Dnieper presented natural obstacles for the Rus'. Some features aided Rus' expeditions, such as islands where supplies could be loaded, ships repaired and rituals performed in safety. Besides islands, however, the Dnieper also had seven cataracts. In addition to presenting physical difficulties by forcing the crews to unload their cargos and boats and drag them on land around the obstacle, this also offered

⁹⁷⁶ S. A. Pletneva, *Kochevniki yuzhnorusskikh stepey v epokhu srednevekov'ya IV–XIII veka* (Voronezh: Voronezhskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2003), 67–81; DAI 182–5; for discussion on Sarkel with further references, see: Zimonyi, *Muslim Sources on the Magyars*, 340–2.

⁹⁷⁷ Lunde and Stone, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 144–5; original: Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 19–20

⁹⁷⁸ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 23.

⁹⁷⁹ Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 19 (Arabic).

⁹⁸⁰ Bosworth and Ashtiany, *The History of Beyhaqi*, 122.

nomads an opportunity for ambushes. The offences committed by the Pechenegs are well known from the Byzantine report of Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus.⁹⁸¹

The geographical and political circumstances along the Dnieper in the DAI are confirmed by a later travelogue that notes the existence of the same islands before modern water regulation (flood control) and also notes the permanent danger from nearby mobile groups (the Cossacks at that time).⁹⁸² The Pechenegs, who inhabited the area throughout the tenth century, were regarded as extreme foes even by nomadic standards: the Magyars were reported to fear them.⁹⁸³ The risk the Pechenegs presented in the Dnieper area should not be underestimated; Sviatoslav fell victim to them when returning from his Byzantine campaign in 972. The Pechenegs, previously supporting Sviatoslav in the campaign, ambushed him and his entourage at one of the river fords, beheaded him and made a drinking cup out of his skull.⁹⁸⁴ Thus, Rus' commercial missions or assaults on Constantinople could only be launched if the river was secured. I shall review how the Rus' managed to cross the steppe in each case, best approached chronologically backwards.

The last Rus' expedition against Byzantium travelled exclusively by boat and passed the Dnieper undisturbed, possibly due to an earlier depredation of the Pechenegs by the Rus' *knyaz* Yaroslav the Wise in 1036, after which they dispersed.⁹⁸⁵ The Oghuz', who occupied the Black Sea pastures in place of the Pechenegs, are not mentioned in the sources for this incident.

A former successful strategy of dealing with the Pecheneg danger is described in the PVL. In 944, Igor made a pact with the Pechenegs to support his campaign, insured by Pecheneg hostages.⁹⁸⁶ Thus, there is reason to suspect that the Pechenegs were bought off somehow in 941 because they were not part of that expedition. They probably also supported Oleg in 907, as the chronicle reports that he led his people towards Constantinople "by horse and by ship", the same way as Igor did in 944 when he was allied with them.⁹⁸⁷ Another possibility is that the raid in 907 passed through a no-man's land; after driving the Magyars out of the Dnieper region in 895, it is not clear whether the Pechenegs immediately occupied the area.⁹⁸⁸ The first Pecheneg attack on the Rus' that might support this theory was only recorded in 915, or, according to more reliable Byzantine sources, it might have been in 917.⁹⁸⁹ The hypotheses that the Rus' were either allied with the Pechenegs in 907 or that they

⁹⁸¹ DAI 50–1, 57–63.

⁹⁸² Łukasz Różycki, "Description de l'Ukraine in light of De Administrando Imperio: Two Accounts of a Journey along the Dnieper." *Byzantinoslavica* 72, no. 1–2 (2014): 122–35.

⁹⁸³ DAI 50–1.

⁹⁸⁴ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 157; Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Scylitzae*, 310; PVL 35.

⁹⁸⁵ PVL 66.

⁹⁸⁶ PVL 23.

⁹⁸⁷ RPC 64, 72; PVL 16, 23. This mention of horses might also relate to the Danube Bulgars' or Oleg's own horses. A. N. Sakharov, *Diplomatiya Drevney Rusi* (Moscow: Mysl', 1980), 100–1.

⁹⁸⁸ Font, Márta and Balázs Sudár, *Honfoglalás és államalapítás. 9–10. század. A törzsszövetségtől a keresztény királyságig* (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 2019), 45.

⁹⁸⁹ Immanuel Bekker (ed.), *Theophanes continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius monachus*, CSHB,

went through a yet-uninhabited landscape both add to the point: the nomadic presence implied authority and influenced crossings of the steppe. These precedents make us contemplate the safety of passage through the Dnieper area in 860, when the Magyars occupied the land.

The Magyars, inhabiting the area from around 850 to 895, also carefully guarded their boundaries, as did the Pechenegs and Khazars. This situation is reflected in the story of Cyril, the Slavic missionary, who was heading to the Khazars in 861 but was detained by aggressive Magyars when he entered their territory.⁹⁹⁰ Cyril escaped, but the episode illustrates nomad principles. Under the year 839, the *Annales Bertiniani* also reports “barbarian and savage tribes” (*barbaras et nimiae feritatis gentes*) blocking the way of Rus’ envoys returning from Constantinople.⁹⁹¹ Judging from the geographical proximity of the Dnieper as the closest route leading north from Constantinople, many scholars have expressed the opinion that this passage refers to the Magyars.⁹⁹² Based on these analogies, the assumption seems fair that negotiations might have been needed to neutralize the Magyar threat. The Rus’ attack of 860 also had to travel on the Dnieper, controlled by the Magyars at the time. The campaign could only have been managed if the Rus’ had secured their passage on the Dnieper by either paying tribute or by being on good terms with the Magyars in general. The only other possibility would have been for the Rus’ to pass through the Khazar-Alan strongholds along the Don and descend from the Azov Sea towards Byzantium.

Lastly, Magyar artefacts dated to the mid-tenth century have been found near the Dniester River at two sites (one a stronghold). A new hypothesis connected to these complexes adds to the history of the Magyars and the southern campaigns of the Rus’. Archaeologists argue that these Magyar find complexes imply authority over the territory, meaning that even after moving to the Carpathians the Magyars continued to rule in the East as far as the Dniester, at least until the mid-tenth century. This would be logical because the centre of the polity lay in the Upper Tisza region of the Carpathian Basin and stretched approximately the same distance to west and east.⁹⁹³ Rus’ campaigns trying to reach Byzantium by travelling along the Dnieper and the western shore of the Black Sea therefore faced a Magyar power centre along the Dniester. As allies of Sviatoslav, the Magyars (their Dniester branch at least) may sometimes have been the ‘horsemen’ of the PVL.

no. 33 (Bonn: Weber, 1838), 386–90; PVL 21.

⁹⁹⁰ P. A. Lavrov (ed.), *Materialy po istorii vozniknoveniya drevneyshey slavyanskoy pis'mennosti* (Leningrad: Akademiya Nauk SSSR, 1930), 155.

⁹⁹¹ *Annales Bertiniani*, 19–20. Translation mine.

⁹⁹² Gyula Kristó, *Hungarian History in the Ninth Century* (Szeged: Szegedi Középkorász Műhely, 1996), 86, 128; László Balogh, “Az Annales Bertiniani 839. évi bejegyzése és a magyarok”, in *Fegyveres nomádok, nomád fegyverek*, eds. László Balogh and László Keller, Magyar Őstörténeti Könyvtár, no. 21 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2004), 112–23 (with further references).

⁹⁹³ Attila Türk, “10. századi magyar jelenlét a Kárpátokról keletre”, in *Honfoglalás és megtelepedés*, eds. Balázs Sudár and Zsolt Petkes, Magyar őstörténet, no. 4. Budapest: Helikon, 2016), 84; Péter Langó, *Turulok és Árpádok. Nemzeti emlékezet és koratörténeti emlékek* (Budapest: Typotex, 2017), 79–85.

Finally, a specific phenomenon of traversing steppe territory is related to terrestrial crossing. Land routes presented even more danger for Scandinavians and Rus' than water routes, as they could not withdraw to the water to prevent attacks. Contemporaries duly noted this. Mas'ūdī relates an illuminating example in his history of the raid of 913. After being defeated in battle by Muslim subjects of the Khazars, the Rus' fled towards the Volga on ships. Some of the survivors left the ships behind and continued on land routes, but they were hunted down by the Muslim Volga Bulgars and the Burtas', who controlled the Volga route north of the Khazar nuclear area.⁹⁹⁴ The Burtas' were not interested in religious retaliation against the Rus' (as were the Muslims of Itil and Bulgar), thus their bloodthirstiness towards the Rus' is better explained by steppe attitudes protective of their territory. Simple greed could also have played a part. Although the fleeing Rus' left behind their ships, presumably some of the cargo and previously plundered riches were taken by the fugitives, as in similar situations in 943, 972 and 1032.⁹⁹⁵

I suggest that the Burtas' shared the attitude that considered any vessel (and its cargo) that drifted ashore on their territory as their property. This mode of thinking was explicitly expressed in the fifteenth century by Afanasy Nikitin, a merchant from Tver. He describes vividly how Tartars and Kaytaks impounded such ships.⁹⁹⁶ Ibn Ḥawqal, describing a similar situation in which a nomadic Oghuz group broke off from the main Oghuz tribal union and settled on an island in the Caspian, warns sailors to avoid a shipwreck on the island because "it is not possible to salvage anything due to the Turks, who seize it; they take everything which is in them".⁹⁹⁷ As noted in Chapter 2, the Pechenegs along the Dnieper lived according to the same mentality.

The problems of traversing steppe territories arose because nomads vigilantly guarded their territories and interests. The continuous references in contemporary and later sources to the perils of such a journey (sometimes appearing only as general references to 'barbarians') derived from the nomads' aggressive attitude, as tribes fiercely defended their livestock and pasture. The steppe people had various means of monitoring their areas. Establishing fortified watch posts, as the Khazars did, was effective on frequently travelled river and land routes. Neighbouring nomads on the Black Sea steppes – the Magyars and Pechenegs – probably had different ways of identifying potential threats. The territory between Kiev and the Black Sea steppes included a few days' march through a no-man's land that served as a frontier zone between the Rus' and the nomads. Bruno of Querfurt, a missionary headed from Kiev to the lands of the Pechenegs, described it in a letter in 1008. He states that after leaving the border of the Rus' ruler (*senior Ruzem*) they met no one for two days in Pecheneg territory,

⁹⁹⁴ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 23.

⁹⁹⁵ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 66; PVL 35; Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband*, 21 (Arabic).

⁹⁹⁶ Mikhail M. Wielhorsky (trans.), "The Travels of Athanasius Nikitin of Tver", in *India in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Richard H. Mayor (London: Hakluyt Society, 1857), 5–6.

⁹⁹⁷ BGA II–1, 389; translation by István Lánckzy.

but were confronted on the third day.⁹⁹⁸ Gardīzī also informs his readers that between the country of the Pechenegs and the Saqlābs there is no “cut highway”, and the journey takes ten days.⁹⁹⁹ No hostile force could get through this vast flat landscape unnoticed, and, as the examples of both Cyril and Bruno illustrate, even a small group was easily spotted by patrols. Predictable operations like annual trading journey, or campaigns requiring considerable mobilization did not struck steppe people out of the blue. Thus, terrestrial and river routes in nomadic areas could only be used if the steppe dwellers were bought off. Unannounced expeditions in their pastures provoked aggression, which resulted in short-term financial gain from looting the Rus’ in passage. The only strategy for managing this situation was to promise a later share, either an agreed-upon sum to be paid later or by joining forces with the nomads, who would then acquire their share during a campaign. Immediate payment for safe passage was also possible, as nomadic polities collected fees at border control points.

The Rus’, in the minority compared to the tribes, had to sacrifice profit or else risk their physical well-being in order to cross the steppes. The power relations were not in favour of the Rus’. Until they began to employ extensive cavalry in Sviatoslav’s times, the Rus’ were on the defensive and even later suffered heavy blows from nomadic incursions. It is intriguing, however, that there is a relative lack of Scandinavian or Rus’ raids against steppe territories in the sources.

The reasoning that steppe territories offered no wealth for plunder is not a sufficient explanation; nomads in general, especially the steppe societies, were not necessarily poor. In addition to describing the most prosperous commercial hubs in the region, Itil and Bulgar, individual comments by medieval authors also emphasize the material wealth of the elites of the steppe dwellers. Ibn Faḍlān, for instance, was amazed at the magnificence of the Volga Bulghar court, first by the size of the king’s yurt, which could hold a thousand people, and second by the furnishing of the interior, carpeted with Armenian rugs, and the king’s throne, bedecked with Byzantine silk.¹⁰⁰⁰ He writes about the Oghuz’ that they are poor, but nevertheless some of them own 10,000 horses and 100,000 sheep,¹⁰⁰¹ which suggests that the elite was indeed wealthy. Gardīzī straight-forwardly says of the Pechenegs: “These Pechenegs are the possessors of great wealth, for they are possessors of abundant horses and sheep. They have many gold and silver vessels. They have many weapons. They have silver belts”.¹⁰⁰² He similarly says of the Magyars that: “their clothes are of brocade and their weapons are made of silver and are goldplated”,¹⁰⁰³ which is confirmed by the *Hudūd*: “They are very rich people but base”.¹⁰⁰⁴

⁹⁹⁸ Jadwiga Karwasińska (ed.), “Epistola Brunonis ad Henricum regem”, in *Monumenta Poloniae Historica. Series Nova*. Vol. 4/3 (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawn, 1973), 99.

⁹⁹⁹ Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters”, 163.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 228–9.

¹⁰⁰¹ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 212–3.

¹⁰⁰² Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters”, 152.

¹⁰⁰³ Martinez, “Gardīzī’s two chapters”, 162.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Bosworth, *Hudūd al-‘Ālam*, 101.

Other examples related to the lucrative steppe commerce, such as paid mercenary service for gold and lavish gifts from Byzantine rulers, should be further enumerated.¹⁰⁰⁵ Thus, the main riches of the steppe were movable property, quite a suitable target for raiders.

The difference, compared to Western Europe, lies in the fact that the wealth of steppe societies lay with the military elite, who, even had they not been surrounded by a multitude of warriors, could muster forces in a hurry and quickly pursue attackers on horseback. If raiders intended to take livestock, their escape, slowed down by animals, would have been problematic. The Pechenegs persistently followed Rus' ship caravans all the way to the Byzantine border in the hope of ambushing them at fords or capturing their drifting vessels. These Rus' expeditions were not hostile towards the Pechenegs but were simple commercial enterprises. The retaliation a direct raid on a tribal chief's household or a steppe state's town would have called forth must be wondered at; the four-month-long retaliatory campaign of the Khazars for the sacking of Tmutarakan is an example. The organizational principles of nomadic societies ensured that a considerable number of the pastoralist population (and probably the majority of men) were trained to become warriors from early childhood, constantly ready for deployment.¹⁰⁰⁶ 'Hit-and-run' actions on steppe territories were hazardous, greatly contrasting with the ease of robbing un- or poorly defended towns and ecclesiastical sites in Western Europe and escaping quickly on the rivers before the local lords could gather their men. The only exception, recorded by Dimashqī (noted earlier), is revealing.

Another point of comparison is the warlike nature of eastern adversaries compared to those in the West. Westerners describing the vikings as the 'scourge of God' because of their merciless and savage nature is nothing new to any scholar of the Viking Age, and similar stories are told about the Rus'.¹⁰⁰⁷ Whether this picture painted by outsiders is exaggerated or not, nearly the same brutality is reported about the nomads of the East at the same time, implying that in terms of cruelty Scandinavians and Rus' were as fierce as the steppe dwellers. The shock Ibn Faḍlān expresses at the Oghuz' custom of punishing adulterers and thieves by tearing them apart with two tree branches and the Volga Bulgars' chopping them up with axes and putting their limbs on display, are vivid mementos of everyday harsh realities.¹⁰⁰⁸ Facing nomads, Scandinavians and Rus' confronted enemies that were not so different in mentality.

¹⁰⁰⁵ BGA I-7, 143; DAI 52-7.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Denis Sinor, "The Inner Asian Warriors", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101, no. 2 (1981): 133-44; William Irons, "Cultural Capital, Livestock Raiding, and the Military Advantage of Traditional Pastoralists", in *Nomadic pathways in social evolution*, eds. Nikolay N. Kradin, Dmitri N. Bondarenko and Thomas J. Barfield, Civilizational dimension, no. 5 (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2003), 63-72.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Maḡoudi, *Les prairies d'or*, Vol. 2, 21; Carl Müller (ed.), 1883. Photius, "De Rossorum incursione homoliæ duæ"; Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 63; Andrew Smithies and John M. Duffy (ed. and trans.), *Nicetae Davidis Vita Ignatii Patriarchae*, CFHB, no. 51 (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2013), 44; PVL 17; BGA II-1, 393.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 202-3, 232-3.

Lastly, the odds in numbers were not in favour of the Scandinavian Rus'. According to István Zimonyi, who collected all possible data from Muslim sources pertaining to steppe armies in the period, the generally emerging picture, even if some data are contradictory or might have been corrupted during copying, is that the nomads' fighting forces numbered "ten thousands", for which the Turkic word was *tumen*. Even the Burtas', just a tribute-paying tribe of the Khazars, could provide 10,000 warriors, according to Ibn Rusta. The Magyars were said to be able to mount 20,000, or according to Mas'ūdī, 50,000, warriors. The central unit of the Khazar army consisted of 4,000, and later 7,000, bodyguards, supplemented by 10,000–15,000 Khwarazmian mercenaries and some Slavic and Rus' slave warriors. The Khazars could also call for reinforcements from their subject groups: the Burtas', the Alans and the Sarirs; in certain periods the Volga Bulgars; and probably also the Magyars. The size of the Volga Bulgar military forces is not precisely known; the data seem to refer to entire tribal groupings rather than to weapon-bearers only. Nevertheless, they probably also had an army of no fewer than 10,000 horsemen based on comparison with neighbouring tribes.¹⁰⁰⁹

Questions regarding these numbers arise because it is uncertain whether they (suspiciously rounded up by Muslim writers) apply only to arms bearers or to whole tribal groupings. This is especially important in the cases of those who were subject to the Khazars, such as the Burtas' and the Magyars. One favourable aspect of the accounts is their relative conformity in counting steppe military forces in the thousands. Furthermore, as noted earlier, nomadic communities were martial societies in which most of the able-bodied males were trained in warfare. What is generally known about nomadic economic and social organization also suggests that the population was denser than in the forest belt and could quickly be mustered. The political history of these tribes, such as the Khazars' repulse of the Arab advance or the early and mid-tenth-century military incursions of the Magyars into Western Europe, also speaks favourably of the military potential of such societies.

With the exception of Sviatoslav's campaign in 965/969 against the Khazars and Bulgars, none of the large attacks targeted nomadic abodes. To historians favouring low army numbers in the Early Middle Ages, the figures given here on nomadic armies, even if some of them are overstatements, provide a satisfying reason in themselves to question whether Scandinavian and Rus' warbands (or even armies) on their own would have stood a chance against the nomads in open battle. This would also partly explain why there is a suspicious silence in the sources about Rus' small-scale raids directed towards the steppe.

To sum up, Scandinavian and Rus' raiding parties in the ninth and tenth centuries did not look favourably on steppe destinations. Besides the possible reward, which could not be measured beforehand, neither the geographical situation (escaping unpursued) nor power relations (the military

¹⁰⁰⁹ Zimonyi, *Muslim Sources on the Magyars*, 102–16.

strength of the others) would have supported such a choice. Thousands of horsemen probably seemed to be an insuperable obstacle to defeat on the battlefield. Logic dictated that if the risks were high, the reward should equal them in size. Major campaigns directed towards Byzantium were almost always assisted by nomads. The Muslim colonies on the Caspian shore offered a better target for raids, but major operations here failed. Even though Rus' armies, enlarged with local conscripts, probably outnumbered their western viking counterparts, the enemies in the east still had the upper hand against them in numbers and military tactics or technologies (examples are the river blockades built by the Khazars, Greek fire utilized by the Byzantine navy, and nomadic cavalry in general that would have been hard to defeat in open combat). It was wiser to maintain peace with the closest neighbours, the steppe-nomads, to follow their rules and try to acquire wealth from beyond the spheres of the steppes.

The other unique feature of Rus' warfare, in comparison to western vikings, concerns the phenomenon described in Chapter 3. The Rus' combined traditional Scandinavian warfare with those of the nomadic world. The traditions they brought with themselves and effectively practiced in the East concerns weaponry, battlefield tactics and strategical mobility. The use of viking weaponry – spears, axes, swords, daggers, bow and arrows –¹⁰¹⁰ by the Rus' is well attested in both written and archaeological evidence and was outlined in Chapter 3, together with the visible evidence of acquiring weaponry from the steppes. Few details, however, can be added to the discussion, especially on tactics.

The Rus' employed a clever combination of traditional viking and nomadic warfare methods. Miskawayh, for instance, first writes that the Rus' fight on foot, then adds later that their arms resemble those of the Dailamites,¹⁰¹¹ a people of Iranian descent inhabiting the southwest coast of the Caspian at the time. The Dailamites were notorious infantrymen, who, unlike other Persian armies, fought in closed battle formation in which warriors defended their ranks closely with shields. Much like the vikings, their shields were painted. For the offensive, they thrustured with or hurled a characteristic two-pronged short spear called *ūpīn*. For closed combat they fought with battle axes and swords.¹⁰¹² Miskawayh, therefore, was quite right in capturing the similarities between Dailamites formations and that of what was probably a viking shield-wall. The near-contemporary Leo the Deacon confirms Miskawayh's information when notes that the Rus' arrayed themselves on the battlefield (probably in a similar formation) and protected themselves with shields reaching to their feet.¹⁰¹³ It must have been an effective combination with supporting nomadic-style cavalry

¹⁰¹⁰ Pedersen, "Viking weaponry".

¹⁰¹¹ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 63, 81.

¹⁰¹² Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "Military Organization under the Buyids of Persia and Iraq", *Oriens* 18–19 (1965–66): 149–50.

¹⁰¹³ Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 155.

included in Rus' armies either as allies or Rus' units trained for horse riding and fighting in the same way. Western viking armies, used horses too, however, it was for tactical mobility, allowing to threaten the inlands in distance from navigable rivers.¹⁰¹⁴ There is no indication that they were fighting from horseback earlier than the very late tenth century.

The most usual and successful strategy employed Scandinavian expertise on water and nomadic superiority in the open fields. Rus' shipcaravans and pirate fleets were accompanied while on campaign by horsemen along the river shores.¹⁰¹⁵ A nice snapshot of the usefulness of having these two mobile forces of different nature in a single army, comes from the Dorostolon campaign of Sviatoslav. The Rus' *knyaz* had held the upper hand in affairs on the open field until his nomadic allies abandoned him, but was still able to secure supplies to his besieged troops through the rivers by sneaking out on his ships with a commando passing the Byzantine river blockade.¹⁰¹⁶ Whether nomadic people ever boarded viking ships in joint operations is a disputed matter. The unique note by Ibn Ḥawqal, which is missing from al-Iṣṭakhrī whom he copied, on the Rus' carrying Pecheneg hordes to an Al-Andalusian raid might be a confusion with the joint campaign of Sviatoslav and the Oghuz', however the author is very specific in his identification of various Turkic tribes.¹⁰¹⁷

Mobility, provided by sea- and river-going ships, was the main advantage of the vikings against the sedentary adversaries of the West.¹⁰¹⁸ This was also true for the Rus', even so that mobility permeated their ways of living, and might be compared to the lifestyle of Eurasian nomads. The rhythm of life on the steppe, namely, was not completely alien to the Scandinavian Rus'. It has been even recently remarked that the usual 'sedentary-nomadic' division is inappropriate for early medieval conditions on account that members of sedentary societies were also highly mobile throughout the year. In addition, certain groups, performing similar lifestyles to nomads are not termed as such in the sources, a prime example of which are the Rus'. In contrast, nomadic people, as for instance the Pechenegs, do not receive the 'nomadic' label by contemporary sedentary observers, probably because they, similarly to agriculturalists, had territorial boundaries and fixed places where they could be found in certain times of the year. During certain activities such as mercenary service, craft production, trade and resource-gathering, nomadic people also spent

¹⁰¹⁴ John Harold Clapham, "The Horsing of the Danes", *The English Historical Review* 25, no. 98 (1910): 287–93; Williams, "Raiding and warfare", 198; Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 174–6.

¹⁰¹⁵ PVL 16, 23, 39.

¹⁰¹⁶ Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Scylitzae*, 302–3.

¹⁰¹⁷ James E. Montgomery, "Arabic sources on the Vikings", in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 558–9.

¹⁰¹⁸ Williams, "Raiding and warfare", 197–8.

considerable time in one place and embarked on mobile missions no more frequently than contemporary ‘sedentary’ merchants, diplomats, rulers and armies.¹⁰¹⁹

In several regards, the Rus’ indeed more strongly resemble the nomads than other sedentary populations. Alike ‘pure nomads’, they did not cultivate fields either according to the report of Ibn Rusta pertaining to the mid-ninth century.¹⁰²⁰ Ibn Rusta, acquiring his information from Jayhānī (perhaps even orally), is trustworthy in this regard, and likely caught a glimpse of Rus communities in their early stage, when permanent settlement and agriculture did not play a part in their ways of living.¹⁰²¹ In addition, mobility and movement gave the central feature of ‘viking’ as well as nomadic way of life. Both were mostly driven by inner social dynamics rather than only economic reasons. Hunger for wealth and prestige increased social competition and triggered great movements in Scandinavia and the steppes.¹⁰²² Thus, the Scandinavian Rus’ were used to being in *motion* just as many of the steppe people, only on ships rather than on horseback. Although it might have been a figure of speech to abuse their uncivilized manners, a Byzantine eyewitness, Patriarch Photius, in 860 even remarked that the Rus’ were ‘nomadic’ (*nomadikón*).¹⁰²³ Seasonal migration was also practiced by Rus’ communities. In the mid-tenth century, their centre in Kiev, for instance, was a starting point of recurring winter cruises in the forest belt (called *poliudia* in Greek). Upon their return to Kiev, they quickly got ready on the spring for a commercial mission to Constantinople only to return ‘home’ next winter:

“The severe manner of life of these same Russians in winter-time is as follows. When the month of November begins, their chiefs together with all the Russians, at once leave Kiev and go off on the ‘poliudia’, which means ‘rounds’, that is to the Slavonic regions of the Vervians, Drugovichians and Krivichians and Severians and the rest of the Slavs who are tributaries of the Russians. There they are maintained throughout the winter, but then once more, starting from the month of April, when the ice of the Dnieper river melts, they come back to Kiev. They then pick up their ‘monoxyla’, as has been said above, and fit them out, and come down to Romania.”¹⁰²⁴

¹⁰¹⁹ Naomi Standen and Monica White, “Structural mobilities in the Global Middle Ages”, *Past & Present* 238, no. 13 (2018): 158–89.

¹⁰²⁰ BGA I–7, 145.

¹⁰²¹ Montgomery, “Ibn Rusta’s lack of eloquence”, 81–4.

¹⁰²² A. V. Golovnov, *Antropologiya dvizheniya (drevnosti Severnoy Yevrazii)* (Yekaterinburg: Uro RAN: Volot, 2009), 156–310; Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard, “Polygyny, concubinage and the social life of women in Viking-Age Scandinavia”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13 (2017): 165–209 (with further references).

¹⁰²³ Photius, “De Rossorum incursione homoliæ duæ”, 168.

¹⁰²⁴ DAI 62–3.

The Volga Rus' similarly embarked on long trading expeditions annually, and in fact travelled with their women, a sign that a larger segment of their community rather than only a professional group of entrepreneurs 'moved'.¹⁰²⁵ Both in the case of the Dnieper and Volga examples, the mainly Scandinavian elite layers of Rus society embarked on the venture, which, however, is not drastically different from the practices of contemporary steppe migrations which involved the ruling, nomadic strata of the society and not all subjugated people, obviously not the agriculturalists.¹⁰²⁶ In light of the cited reports which offer snapshots of various Rus communities throughout the mid-ninth to the mid-tenth centuries, the Rus' may righteously be called 'nomads of the rivers', if a certain fluidity towards the term's interpretation is allowed.¹⁰²⁷

Mobility was first of all based on suitable watercrafts and navigable waterways.¹⁰²⁸ This was surely the case from the Middle Dnieper southward as confirmed by the DAI, which describes the huge preparations before Rus' expeditions of carving out small dug-out canoes (*monoxyla*) specifically designed to sail to Constantinople on the Dnieper, and be allowed to lift overland when cataracts had to be bypassed.¹⁰²⁹ Clinker-built boat planks and Scandinavian types of rivets found around Rostov and Gnezdovo testify that rivers were navigable with larger ships as well.¹⁰³⁰ Scandinavian artefacts, two viking swords and a boat rivet, found along the Donets indicate that the Rus' utilized this river too.¹⁰³¹ Natural river portages and navigable water systems, however were inadequate in themselves to allow for larger operations to be launched. They needed supplies and strategic points for rendezvous and potential withdrawal.

No doubt, the maintenance of this system required a high level of co-ordination. Considerable preparations were taken for journeys, as indicated by the DAI; stockpiling resources already began in winter time by cutting down suitable trees for the manufacture of boats, which, after the ice melted in spring, were brought down to nearby lakes. Before the whole fleet gathered, the tree trunks were equipped with oars, rowlocks and tackle before the expedition could set out in June. Even this was problematic and the boats had to regroup for two to three days downstream the river near another Rus

¹⁰²⁵ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 240–1.

¹⁰²⁶ György Györffy, "A honfoglaló magyarok települési rendjéről", *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 97 (1970): 191–242.

¹⁰²⁷ Omeljan Pritsak, "The Origin of Rus'." *The Russian Review* 36, no. 3 (1977): 249–73; Boris Naimushin, "Khazarskiy Kaganat i Vostochnaya Yevropa: stolknoveniya mezhdru "kochevnikami stepey" i "kochevnikami rek"", in *Bŭlgari i khazari prez Rannoto srednovekovie*, ed. Tsvetelin Stepanov (Sofia: Tangra, 2003), 142–58; Golovnov, *Antropologiya dvizheniya*, 253–310. Designations such as 'nomads of the sea' and 'nomads of the rivers' as pertaining to Vikings and Rus' are not to be confused with the current anthropological labelling 'sea nomads', which refers to highly skilled fisher and diving communities of South Asia. The latter dwell almost exclusively on the water in floating houses.

¹⁰²⁸ A lot has been written on this. For a summary with further literature, see: Katona, *Vikings of the steppe*, 69–72 and *passim*.

¹⁰²⁹ DAI 56–63.

¹⁰³⁰ Shepard, "Things, persons and practices", 281–2.

¹⁰³¹ Fedir Androshchuk, "What does material evidence tell us about contacts between Byzantium and the Viking World c. 800–1000?", in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, eds. Fedor Androshchuk, Jonathan Shepard and Monica White (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2016), 97.

settlement.¹⁰³² Therefore, the securing of continuous supplies and maintenance of naval mobility was on the Rus' agenda all the time. It is stated in the 907 Byzantine-Rus' treaty, that the Rus' obtained from the Greeks free provisions, as well as "anchors, cordage and sails" for their return journey, which the 944 treaty also confirmed.¹⁰³³ Recent excavations in Shestovitsa and Chernigov identified funnel-shaped pits producing tar to render hulls waterproof.¹⁰³⁴ There are identical structures in *emporion* across Rus' (for instance at Gnezdovo) and in rural environments in the wider Viking world.¹⁰³⁵ In Gnezdovo, a jetty – another feature of riverine Scandinavian sites – was constructed on the riverside with a smithy on it, which was entrusted with the repair of vessels.¹⁰³⁶ All these testify that ship repairs were performed even in southerly Rus' environments, just like in riverine sites across the Viking world.¹⁰³⁷

Islands worked as effective headquarters for viking hosts in the Viking East also. It is confirmed by the presence of (sometimes temporary) Rus' garrisons on islands of the Dnieper and at the mouth of the Black Sea. The 945 Byzantine-Rus' peace treaty stipulates that from then on, the Rus' should not winter on the islands of Belobereg and St. Eleutherius,¹⁰³⁸ suggesting that it was habitual before. The passage also makes it clear that in the rest of the year, they were allowed to remain there. As Constantine reports, the latter island (today called Berezan') served as a supply station on the Rus' itinerary; the Rus' arriving from Dnieper rested here two or three days and re-equipped their boats with sails, masts and rudders.¹⁰³⁹ As evidenced by a runestone inscribed with an Old-Norse obituary by a Gotlander named Grani to his business partner Karl, the crews must have honoured their dead as well on the island.¹⁰⁴⁰ The runestone was not discovered in its original place, but was probably rested on top of a minor barrow in the vicinity,¹⁰⁴¹ implying that there might have been additional burials there other than the exceptional ones commemorated by runestones. Another Gotlander, Hrafn, also died at the Aiefor cataract as evinced on his runestone erected back home (G 280), which also states that he received a memorial stone in south of *Rufstæini*, possibly a site nearby, for which islands are the safest guess.¹⁰⁴² The Aiefor was one of the most dangerous barrages of the Dnieper, as

¹⁰³² DAI 56–9.

¹⁰³³ RPC 65; PVL 17, 24.

¹⁰³⁴ Shepard, "Shestovytsya revisited", 25.

¹⁰³⁵ Pushkina et al., "Der archäologische Komplex von Gnezdovo", 254–5, 271; Andreas Henni, "Viking Age tar production and outland exploitation", *Antiquity* 92 (2018): 1349–61.

¹⁰³⁶ Murasheva, "Rus, routes and sites", 232.

¹⁰³⁷ Ian Russell and Maurice F. Hurley (ed.), *Woodstown: A Viking-Age Settlement in Co. Waterford* (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2014), 145–7, 154–5, 355.

¹⁰³⁸ PVL 25.

¹⁰³⁹ DAI 60–1.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Fedor Braun and Ture Johnsson Arne, "Den svenska runstenen från ön Berezanj utanför Dneprmynningen", *Fornvännen* 9 (1914): 44–8.

¹⁰⁴¹ Braun and Arne, "Den svenska runstenen från ön Berezanj", 45.

¹⁰⁴² Wolfgang Krause, "Der Runenstein von Pilgards", *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* (1952): 53–68.

boats had to be dragged ashore in order to pass it and these often fell prey to the Pechenegs. The largest island Khoritsa, called Saint Gregory by the Greeks, was another shelter after leaving the last barrage of the Dnieper. The ford, called *Vrar* in Slavonic, where the ‘Little Barrage’ had to be crossed presented the nearby Pechenegs the most favourable opportunity to ambush Rus’ ship caravans. Thus, after being relieved of the nomadic threat, the Rus’ honoured their luck with rooster sacrifices performed in tranquility at an oak tree on Khoritsa.¹⁰⁴³ Wetland sacrifices of weapons thrown into the water were probably also practiced here as indicated by the survival of a half-dozen Viking Age double-edged swords from the riverbed.¹⁰⁴⁴ The island provided absolute safety from the Pechenegs as illustrated also by Sviatoslav’s last sojourn there; despite the heavy famine among his troops, they were able to winter on the island where the nomads were unable to ambush them.¹⁰⁴⁵

Islands were utilized also during offensive operations. As noted above, information collected by Dimashqī from unknown intel circulated about Rus’ inhabited islands of the Mānīṭaṣ, that is the Azov Sea, from where they raided the Khazar peripheries in warships.¹⁰⁴⁶ If this was not a single accident as the passage claims, these small islands were strategic points, garrisoned by the Rus’ with considerable forces, and furnished to fulfil tasks designated above in case of the Dnieper islands. There were also *ad hoc* camps on the Caspian islands occupied temporarily during longer military campaigns. In 913, for instance, after devastating the so-called Naptha Coast around Baku (belonging to the kingdom of Shirvan), the Rus’ took refuge in the islands just a few miles off the shores. The king of Shirvan, ‘Alī ibn al-Haytham (913–7) tried to drive them out with a scrappy fleet of merchant vessels and fishing boats, but failed miserably, leaving many Muslims killed or drowned in the attempt.¹⁰⁴⁷ As Mas‘ūdī states, no one living around the Caspian Sea could oppose the Rus’ for many months on account of this tactic.¹⁰⁴⁸ From the easy repelling of such attacks it is perhaps safe to assume that the Rus’ constructed temporary fortifications. It is no wonder that the earliest reference to the Rus’ abodes in the ninth century locates them in a swampy island in a lake, an ideally defensible place at a time of vulnerability during the early stage of their settlement, as well as a convenient headquarter from where slave taking expeditions against the Slavs were launched as the ‘Anonymous Relation’ notes.¹⁰⁴⁹ The Old Norse place name, *Hólmgarðr* (‘island-enclosure’) referring to later Novgorod, is perhaps another proof for choosing islands as permanent dwellings. On islands, units could re-group, expeditions prepared, provisions stored, ships fitted, rituals performed and dead

¹⁰⁴³ DAI 60–1.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Androshchuk, “Har götlandska vikingar offrat vapen”; Komar, “Mechi Dneprostroya”.

¹⁰⁴⁵ PVL 35.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Dimichqui, *Cosmographie*, 262.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d’or*, Vol. 2, 21–2.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Maçoudi, *Les prairies d’or*, Vol. 2, 22.

¹⁰⁴⁹ see in Ibn Rusta: BGA I–7, 145.

buried, all in relative safety from hostile attacks and the natural perils of riverine (or maritime) voyages.

In tandem, just like the vikings in the West, the Rus' were constantly equipped with handicrafts tools while *en route* to execute a variety of tasks related to camping, defensive works and ship repairs. Miskawayh describes Rus' warriors in artisans' outfit, carrying with themselves axes, saws and hammers besides regular weapons.¹⁰⁵⁰ Although it is related to a commercial mission, Ibn Faḍlān indirectly confirms the carrying of handicraft tools on voyages when notes that upon docking at the Volga, the Rus' erected temporary wooden dwellings on the river bank.¹⁰⁵¹ According to a later manuscript in the possession of the famous Russian scholar, Tumansky, during their campaign against Bardha'ah, the Rus' constructed a small fortress on the river Kur at Mubarak before seized Bardha'ah, and also withdraw towards that with their booty.¹⁰⁵² The instance is extremely similar to viking landing places fortified with ramparts in the West. The emergence of Rus' towns is at least partly connected to this phenomenon: Rus' warbands arriving in the forest belt ensured their rule over the local population by erecting forts (*gorodishche* in Russian literature) on riverine sites.¹⁰⁵³ It has been recently postulated that several ring-shaped fortifications, later evolving into military-administrative centres, were localized in the Dniester region in present-day Moldova too.¹⁰⁵⁴

Rus' naval mobility was cleverly combined with fast land travel. The Rus' acquired horses from the steppe nomads and likely utilized them for their 'winter cruises'. Osteological analysis of horse bone finds from Gnezdovo and Shestovitsa suggests that the Rus' owned a mixed breed of animals and parts of the herds were acquired from the nomads.¹⁰⁵⁵ Emperor Constantine succinctly summarized the situation: "The Russians also are much concerned to keep the peace with the Pechenegs. For they buy of them horned cattle and horses and sheep, whereby they live more easily and comfortably, since none of the aforesaid animals is found in Russia".¹⁰⁵⁶ Later, an alternative supply of horses might have come from the Magyars. Regarding the market of Pereyaslavets on the Danube to where Sviatoslav intended to transfer his seat, the PVL puts the following words into *knyaz's* mouth: "that is the center of my realm, where all riches are concentrated: gold, silks, wine and various fruits from Greece, silver and horses from Hungary and Bohemia, and from Rus' furs,

¹⁰⁵⁰ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 63.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, 242–3.

¹⁰⁵² A. Yu. Yakubovskiy, "Ibn-Miskaveykh o pokhode Rusov na Berdaa v 332 g. = 943/4 g." *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* 24 (1926): 91.

¹⁰⁵³ Pushkina, "Viking-period pre-urban settlements in Russia"; Fedir Androshchuk, "Černigov et Šestovica, Birka et Hovgårdén; cf. Nosov, "The emergence and development of Russian towns".

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ion Tentiuc, "The Vikings and Their Relationship with the Romance Inhabitants of the Carpatho-Nistrian Lands in 9th—11th Centuries", *Stratum Plus* 5 (2020): 205–30.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Shepard, "Shestovytsya revisited", 20; Irina V. Kirillova and Natalia N. Spasskaya, "Horse remains from the Gnezdovo archaeological complex, Smolensk Region, Russia", *Russian Journal of Theriology* 14, no. 1 (2015): 85–104.

¹⁰⁵⁶ DAI 48–51.

wax, honey and slaves”.¹⁰⁵⁷ Travel did not cease during winter time either as indicated by several wooden fragments belonging to sleds found in Rus’ settlements from the northern Staraya Ladoga to as far south as Shestovitsa, as well as bone pieces manufactured into ski boots.¹⁰⁵⁸ Constant mobility paired with a highly intricate organization proved outstandingly useful in commercial matters, however, there is no reason to doubt that such effectiveness and combination of land and water travel was spared during military operations.

Another peculiar feature of Rus’ warfare concerns the use of heavy protective armour. Scandinavian vikings were sometimes also clad in mails and wore helmets, however, finds are extremely rare. The only secure Viking Age assemblage, which holds a warrior buried with his armour and a helmet was found in Gjermundbu, Upland (Norway) (*Fig. 15.*).¹⁰⁵⁹ These are the only (intact) remaining specimen from Viking Age Scandinavia, and early on were regarded as imports: the helmet was thought to be a pre-Viking Age relic as helmets were known in the Scandinavian archaeological record only from the famous Vålsgarde cemetery, whilst the armour was considered a Frankish or eastern import. There were probably two burials and four deposits at the site, traditionally dated to the last decades of the tenth century. Since the grave goods did not have exact parallels in Scandinavia, a new study re-examined the whole context of the burial(s) and came to a new interpretation about the identity of the buried. The burial contains traditional Scandinavian elements – a boat, a mound, weapons, cremation, etc.—, however, it also deviates from similar assemblages. Judged by several mouth-bites, the graves contained an unusually large number of horse offerings, probably six in number. There were also four shields deposited at the site (again unusually a lot), and the Petersen type S sword and its unique chape was more characteristic of Swedish and Eastern European finds than Norway itself. The spur of the grave makes it evident that this the grave of a horseman, and the equipment places it among the so-called *ryttergraver* of the period, the Swedish archaeological *terminus technicus* for mounted warrior assemblages of the late tenth century. Most importantly, as noted, no other grave in Scandinavia was equipped with both helmet and mail. However, several burials in Rus’ contained such defensive weaponry: examples are known from cremation graves in Gnezdovo (e.g. mound 18 and 24), Chernigov (Chornaya Mogila, Gul’bische) and four graves in Bol’she Timerevo, whilst inhumation burials in Kiev (Lysaja gora, Grave 117) and Pidgirici could also be listed. In addition, fire flakes containing weapon deposits and cauldrons are

¹⁰⁵⁷ RPC 86; PVL 32.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Søren M. Sindbæk, “Varægiske vinterruter. Slædetransport i Rusland og spørgsmålet om den tidlige vikingetids orientalske import i Nordeuropa”, *Fornvännen* 98, no. 3 (2003): 179–93; Shepard, “Shestovytsya revisited”, 20.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Frans-Arne H. Stylegar and Ragnar L. Børshøj, “Gjermundbu-fundet – en småkonges grav med østlig tilsnitt på Ringerike”, *Viking. Norsk Arkeologisk Årbok* 85 (2021): 89–122. All of the following discussion is based on this article, which contains further references about the details. There is going to be no further reference to the argument in the present paragraph.

known from many of these examples and these are similar to the pattern at Gjermundbu, where in one of the burned deposits a cauldron was turned over the helmet. The presence of a sledge (or sledges) in the burial was also a custom related to the funeral of Rus' *knyazes*: Vladimir, Boris, Gleb and Yaroslav was also carried on a sledge during their funerals. The historical background also indicates that the Upland petty kings around Ringerike had extensive eastern connections, both with Sweden and the Rus'. Thus, the final interpretation puts it that the Gjermundbu find must have belonged to an elite warrior active in the Rus' *druzhina* around the end of the tenth century, who brought back to Scandinavia his habits and equipment acquired during his stay there.

As seen from the examples, the archaeological evidence unequivocally bespeaks of the pattern that the Rus' used heavy protective equipment, and that the custom was not (or not so) prevalent in Scandinavia. Written records strengthen the idea that Rus' warriors often wore protective weapons. Miskawayh, for instance, saw it as a regularity: "It is the practice of the individual among them to carry his armour."¹⁰⁶⁰ According to the PVL, the Rus' commander, Pretich, gifted traditional Rus' weapons, including a mail (as well as a shield and a sword) to the Pechenegs during a peace treaty negotiation, and they offered him their own distinctive weapons – spear, sabre and arrows – in return.¹⁰⁶¹ The passage conveys the same impression as Miskawayh, namely that armours were fairly regular among Rus' warriors. In relation to the Balkan campaigns of Sviatoslav, Leo the Deacon also describes an unnamed Rus' commander brandishing a long lance and being protected by armour.¹⁰⁶² Another one, according to him, stood out among his peers by the gleaming of his armour, but "neither his helmet nor his breastplate" was enough to prevent him being struck to death.¹⁰⁶³ Liutprand of Cremona also learned from his informants that during the 941 attack on Constantinople, many Rus' sailors jumped overboard from their ships to escape the flames of Greek fire, but were pulled down to the bottom of the sea by the weights of their breastplates and helmets.¹⁰⁶⁴ All of these accounts concern the middle or the second half of the tenth century, thus roughly correspond to the appearance of mails and helmets in the Rus' archaeological record. It would be nice to test in future research on the basis of Western written accounts, whether Rus' warriors were more heavily armed than perhaps most Scandinavian vikings.

Final remarks

¹⁰⁶⁰ Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 5, 67; original: Miskawaihi, *The concluding portion*, Vol. 2, 63.

¹⁰⁶¹ PVL 32.

¹⁰⁶² Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 108.

¹⁰⁶³ Talbot and Sullivan (eds. and trans.), *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 160; original: Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 110.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Liutprand of Cremona, *Antapodosis* V, 132.

Both raiding and larger viking attacks were just as common in the East as in the West. The low number of recorded Rus' raids in contrast to viking raids in the West is misleading, as it only reflects different conditions in written culture between Greek and Islamic milieus as well as those of Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia. Raids were just as, if not more, regular in the East, only the targets were the unorganized tribal communities of the Eastern European forest belt. The goals were the extraction of tribute in the form of furs and slaves, rather than seeking coins and precious metals as in the West, which were obviously unavailable in the eastern Slavic communities.

Also, the Rus' were also able to amass huge manpower, whose exact size is hard to test against those of the West. Nevertheless, there is every chance that these were even stronger than western viking armies, given the expected resistance from the main adversaries, the Byzantines and the Muslims. That they had little success – never managed to capture Constantinople, nor to set foothold in the lands of Islam or Byzantium – is not surprising in light of contemporary political conditions. In fact, these two contemporary superpowers struggled with each other for centuries for territory. That the Rus' still managed to force Byzantium to peace treaties on several occasions and even attempted to settle in the heart of the Caspian region well illustrates their ambition. Whether these ambitions were strong enough to prompt some Rus' leaders to lead their fleets as far as Al-Andalus, however remains doubtful.

To illuminate how Rus' armies were conscripted, mobilized and operated, western viking analogies were utilized and these show considerable similarities. Rus' armies were assembled through alliances of semi-independent warleaders commanding their own retinues, as well as supplemented by levies from subjugated tribes and nomadic allies. Individual retinues were mobile enough to conduct their own operations and synchronize it with that of a larger host when necessary. Logistics were well organized, and are partly responsible for the success and survival of Rus' communities. Serious preparations were carried out before setting sail; the construction of suitable vessels, setting up defensive and supplier outposts on river islands, scouting and testing alternative routes, and constantly assuring divine assistance in the forms of rituals in connection to travelling.

Whilst western viking armies crossed the open seas directly from Scandinavia and arrived undisturbed into the shores of western kingdoms, the Rus' had to traverse through the open steppes to reach their destinations: lucrative targets were found beyond the nomadic habitat. The steppe dwellers presented obstacles and could be neutralized with payments or convinced to join Rus' expeditions, but many times armed clashes with them were inevitable. Managing the nomadic threat was a key to Rus' campaigns, as without their support they not only had difficulty in getting through the steppes but also had less chance in matching the Byzantines and Muslims. This nomadic impact had probably a fruitful effect on Rus' warfare: traditional viking methods of fighting well-combined

with the support of nomadic cavalry. Horses gave additional mobility to viking groups and might be responsible for the emergence of cavaliers among Rus' society in the late tenth century, equipped with an amalgam of steppe and viking offensive weaponry, horse gear and heavy defensive equipment (armour and helmets). These might have been similar impacts that affected the Danish kingdom upon meeting Frankish and Ottonian cavalry. Thus, the Rus' warfare shows inherent similarities to viking warfare, which is hard to explain otherwise than the concrete affiliation of the Rus' to the Scandinavian diasporas. Nevertheless, conditions in the East were different than in Western Europe and geographics as well as powerful political players left their marks on Rus' warfare.

Chapter 8

The (eastern) king's men

There are constant attempts to widen the horizon of the Viking Age, by proving the presence of Scandinavians in hitherto unexpected places. This last chapter follows suit by tracing the possible presence of Scandinavian warriors in early Árpád Age Hungary. In the following I will discuss the Hungarian aspects of the Icelandic *Örvar-Odds saga*, committed to parchment in the fourteenth century, and telling of a certain Scandinavian warrior named ‘Arrow’ Odd (ON. Örvar Oddr) who, during an unspecified period, took part in the internal strife of the Hungarian kingdom, and according to the story, he himself killed a king of Hungary.

The episode has been only preserved in one of the manuscripts of the saga and has not yet been discussed at all in historiography. Although *Örvar Odds saga* was a popular story in the Middle Ages and has been treated extensively in scholarship, the relevant section has evaded attention. Recent efforts to examine the sections of Scandinavian sources related to Hungarian history also did not know of the scene.¹⁰⁶⁵ For the sake of filling the void, I am also providing an English translation of the passage. After an introduction to the genre of the saga and a brief outline of the plot, I will focus on the passage that is crucial for us, together with its manuscript and textual philological context. The Hungarian setting, which is certainly a rarity in medieval Icelandic saga literature, suggests that the Kingdom of Hungary was not an entirely unknown territory in the far north. In this study I will attempt to assess the possibility whether the source fragment preserved in Scandinavia about Hungary came from first-hand informants; i.e. what might be the historical core of ‘Arrow’ Odd’s activities in Hungary? It will be suggested that a Hungarian source, namely the fourteenth-century *Illuminated Chronicle* might have preserved the memory of two Scandinavian retainers in the service of the Hungarian king, Andrew I (1046–60). This only slightly steps through the traditional dating of the Viking Age ending in the mid-eleventh century: historical periods are rarely strict in chronological regard and the episodes well fit into patterns of the Late Viking Age.

Örvar Odds saga

¹⁰⁶⁵ Richárd Szántó, “Skandináv források adatai a kelet-európai steppére”, in *A Kárpát-medence és a steppe*, ed. Alfréd Márton, Magyar Őstörténeti Könyvtár, no. 14 (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2001), 173–80; Tamás Miszler, “Játvarðar saga. A keleti utazás leírása”, in *Kor – szak – határ. A Kárpát-medence és a szomszédos birodalmak (900–1800)*, eds. Tamás Fedeles, Márta Font and Gergely Kiss (Pécs: PTE-BTK, 2013), 11–21; Tamás Miszler, “Az Edvárd saga (Saga Játvarðar konúngs hins helga) kelet-angolokkal kapcsolatos részének izlandi kútfőiről”, in *Pedagógia, oktatás, könyvtár. Ünnepi tanulmányok F. Dárdai Ágnes tiszteletére*, eds. Helga Csóka-Jaksa, Éva Schmelcz-Pohánka and Gábor Szeberényi (Pécs: Pécsi Tudományegyetem, 2014), 431–43; József Laszlovszky, “A Keleti Új-Anglia és Magyarország”, in Attila Bárány, József Laszlovszky and Zsuzsanna Papp: *Angol–magyar kapcsolatok a középkorban*, Vol. 1 (Máriabesnyő: Attraktor, 2008), 115–41.

Icelandic sagas are literary works recorded from the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, and as introduced in the chapter on sources, they are of disputed historical value. Sagas are mainly prose works, interspersed with short poems, the plots of which sometimes takes place in ancient times: mainly in the Viking Age or in the even older Scandinavian and Germanic world. In parallel with the spread of chivalric literature, however, other types of saga genres were also developed, which chronicled events of later periods. The Old Norse translations of the works of chivalric literature, the “chivalric sagas” (*riddarasögur*), and the “legendary sagas” (*forðaldarsögur*), which tell heroic stories of the legendary past that is fading into obscurity, are of even less historical value.¹⁰⁶⁶ *Örvar Odds saga* belongs to the sub-genre of the *forðaldarsögur*. Although all types of sagas contain a large number of fabulous elements, as well as chronological and natural geographical inaccuracies, it is the latter two genres that could be compared to historical fiction. For a long time, scholars considered these works to have been written for pure entertainment, and this view seemed to be supported by the fact that the texts also include a myriad of trolls, dragons and other unearthly monsters that get in the way of the glorious Scandinavian heroes. However, it has now become clear that even these stories are important sources of mental and ideological history regarding the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries or even earlier periods, thus scholarly interest in them has increased considerably in recent decades.¹⁰⁶⁷

For example, the *forðaldarsögur* also contain poems from the so-called “skaldic” type, most of which are contemporary works of Scandinavian poets and thus represent one of the most authentic groups of source material from the Viking Age. The historical credibility of skaldic poems derives from the intricate rhyming formulas of Old Norse poetry, the slightest alteration of which would cause the rhythmic collapse of the poem. Consequently, these poems could not be easily rewritten and, unlike prose, they could be learned and passed on more easily, thus preserving the original Viking era (or earlier) content.¹⁰⁶⁸ In the case of the *forðaldarsögur*, there are also hints of a more distant past than the Viking Age (for example, the Migration period), which, with one or two exceptions, cannot be authentic. In this genre, which is rich in fictional elements, the poems were usually autobiographical: here the protagonist of the saga – who in narrative prose is usually spoken of in the third person singular – narrates the events himself, in the first person singular. The authors of the poems of the *forðaldarsögur* were in all probability the transcribers of the sagas themselves, who

¹⁰⁶⁶ For a general overview on the sagas and genres with further detailed references, see the following volumes: Clover and Lindow, *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature*; McTurk, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*; Clunies-Ross, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*; Tulinus, *The Matter of the North*; Ney et al., *Forðaldarsagaerne*; Lassen et al., *The Legendary Sagas*.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Their significant publications continue to be: Finnur Jónsson, *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning, 1200–1400*. Vol. 1–2 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal Nordisk forlag, 1912–15). The new volumes are published by Brepols in the SKALD (Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages) series, with critical commentary and English translation.

wanted to give further credence to the described events by adding the poems.¹⁰⁶⁹ With these genre specificities in mind, we now turn to the story of Örvar Oddr.

The passage examined is about two chapters long. The plot of the story can be summarised as follows. The main character of the saga is Örvar (“Arrow”) Oddr, a legendary hero who had been adventuring the world for over three hundred years. The story goes that Oddr, who was born in Norway, was foretold an inhumanly long life as a baby by a *völva* (‘seeress’) who also predicted that Oddr would die in Norway, and that his own horse, Faxi, would be the cause of his death. To avoid his unfortunate fate, Oddr has his horse killed and leaves his country, vowing never to return to his homeland. During his wanderings, Oddr travels to many places, both fictional and historical, including Finland (*Finnland*), the Perm region (*Bjarmaland*), the Kievan Rus (*Garðaríki*), Hunland (*Húnaland*), the land of the giants, Byzantium (*Grikkland*), Jerusalem (*Jórsalaland*) and Sicily (*Síkiley*). In the course of his adventures, he fights or befriends famous heroes (often known from other sources), and gains fame everywhere, especially because of his fights in Perm. Along the way, he battles berserkers on Samsø Island and elsewhere he takes on monsters such as the fabled kraken. He is aided everywhere by his magical arrows – the “gifts of Gusir” (*Gusisnautar*) from the giants, from which he gets his nickname “Arrow”. Subsequently, Oddr becomes king of “Hunland”, which is located in the Russian territories (*Garðaríki*) (!). He also defeats the best warriors of the Hun *konung* Herraud and wins the hand of Herraud’s daughter Silkisif. On the death of the king, he inherits the throne. In his old age, Oddr is finally called home from his newfound “Hunland” kingdom by homesickness. The hero returns home, mocks his childhood prophecy and visits the grave of his horse. At the gravesite, he finds the skull of the horse with a poisonous snake crawling out from underneath. Its bite finally brings Oddr down, fulfilling the prophecy of the *völva*.

The story survived in different versions. One manuscript of the saga includes Hungary among Oddr’s many stops:

Kap. XXXIV.

“Oddr er nú kominn á Jórsalaland; hann snýr nú leið sinni út til Jórdánar, þar ferr hann ór klæðum öllum ok ór skyrtu sinni, ok helt hon öllum kostum sínum. Hann snýr nú austr með hafinu til Sýrlands ok hefir örvamel sinn á baki.

Oddr ferr nú af landi; er ekki sagt af ferð hans, fyrr en hann kemr austr á Ungaraland. Þar réðu fyrir landi konungar II ungir, hétu Vilhjálmr ok Knútr; þeir höfðu fyrir skömmu tekit

¹⁰⁶⁹ Margaret Clunies-Ross, “Poetry in the fornaldarsögur”, in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles, Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York 6th–12th August 2006*, Vol. 1, eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst and Donata Kick (Durham: Brepols, 2006), 180–7.

við föðurleifð sinni. Vilhjálmr var þeira ellri ok vildi hann einn hafa forráð fyrir þeim, en Knútr unði því eigi; urðu þeir af því missáttir ok heldu úfríð.

En af því at Vilhjálmr var þeira reyndr meir í orrostum, þá varð hann liðfleiri ok drjúgari; kom Knútr á flótta ok lét lið mikit. Stökk hann þá ór ríki sínu; aflaði hann þá liðs hvargi sem hann fekk.

Þá er svá er komit, kemr Oddr til mós við Knút konung ok bauð honum lið sitt. Konungr spurði, hverr hann væri, en Oddr sagði. Knútr konungr mælti: ‘Hefir þú farit til Bjarmalands fyrir löngu?’ ‘Ja,’ sagði Oddr, ‘var ek þar.’ Konungr mælti þá: ‘Velkominn skaltu með oss vera; skaltu geraz forstjóri fyrir liði mínu.’

Kap. XXXV.

Nú dróz lið mikit til Knúz konungs, ok eptir þat snýz hann aptr með herinn til síns lands. Oddr mælti þá til Knúz: ‘Nú vil ek, at þú sendir menn til konungs, bróður þíns, ok bjóðir honum frið ok jafnsætti ok helmingaskipti á ríki.’ Konungr segir: ‘Þessa för vil ek, at þú farir.’

Oddr hefir nú með sér C manna ok finnr Vilhjálm konung ok segir honum boð bróður síns. Vilhjálmr konungr segir, at hann vill enskis skiptis Knúti konungi unna á ríki meira en hann sé innan hirðar. Oddr kvað hann eflaust mega þat vita, at Knútr konungr mun eptir leita sínum hluta. Þeir skilðu at svá mæltu. Oddr ferr nú ok segir Knúti konungi svá skapat, ok at þeim var allra sætta varnat. Eptir þat stefna þeir herinum í mót Vilhjálmi konungi, ok þegar þeir finnaz, slær þar í mikinn bardaga. Oddr gekk svá hart fram, at hann brauz á skjáldborg Vilhjálms konungs, ok um síðir lagði hann sverði í gegnum hann; fell konungr þá undir merkjum sínum.

Var þá æpr sigróp um allan herinn. Knútr konungr lét þá stöðva bardagann ok bjóða öllum mönnum grið. Tók þat þá öll alþýða; játtu honum allir menn þá hlýðni ok gáfu þar til trú sína. Eptir þat settiz Knútr konungr í ríki sitt; bauð hann þá Oddi alla kosti með sér. Hér um kvað Oddr þessa vísu:

‘Unþak eige, áþr Ungara,
lofpunga tvá líta knáttak;
réþk meþ öþrom arfs at kveþja,
veittak jöfre vilt ofsinne.’

Kap. XXXVI.

Oddr hefir þar nú verit svá, at nökkurum misserum hefir skipt, ok þá gerir honum svá leitt, at hann má þar með engu móti lengr dveljaz. Konungr býðr honum lið mikit, en hann kvez þat með engu móti vilja.”

Chapter 34

“Oddr now came to Jerusalem (*Jórsalaland*); he took his way to the River Jordan, there took off all his clothes, slipped out of his shirt, and took all his belongings to his hand. He turned East alongside the sea coast until Syria (*til Sýrlands*), with his quiver thrown on his back.

Oddr ventured now through countries, but nothing is said about his travels before he reached Hungary (*Ungaraland*). There ruled two young kings over the country, named Vilhjálmr and Knútr; they lived in shame due to their paternal heritage. Vilhjálmr was the older one and wanted to have the power over the kingdom, but Knútr did not let this: their faith was to maintain antipathy and unrest.

It is held that Vilhjálmr proved a better warrior: he was more able-bodied and better (in fighting). Knútr had to flee and lost a great host. He then left his kingdom, and gathered men around himself wherever he could.

Then it came about that Oddr arrived personally to King Knútr and offered him his services. The king asked who he was and Oddr answered. King Knútr spoke: ‘You have travelled to Perm (*Bjarmaland*) long ago? ‘Yes’, said Oddr, ‘I have been there’. The king said to this: ‘Welcome among us; you shall lead my troops’.

Chapter 35

Now drew troops in great number to Knútr, and then he turned with his army towards his country. Then Oddr said to Knútr: ‘Now I want that you send people to the king, your brother, and offer him peace, equality and equal share from the kingdom.’ The king said: ‘I want you to go.’ Oddr set off with 120 men (*C manna*)¹⁰⁷⁰, found King Vilhjálmr and reported him his brother’s offer. King Vilhjálmr said that he did not wish more to divide his kingdom with Knútr than before. Oddr answered to him that it is better if he knew that King Knútr will come after his share. They departed with the said things. Oddr now went

¹⁰⁷⁰ The saga says 100 written with a Roman C, but this was actually 120 people according to the Icelandic numbering system of the period.

to King Knútr and told him how things happened and that all pursuit of peace was denied. After this, they launched their army against King Vilhjálmr and when they met, there ensued a great battle. Oddr pressed forward so hardly that he broke through the shield-wall of King Vilhjálmr and finally pierced his sword through him; the king fell and many of his men.

Shouts of victory were heard all over the army. King Knútr then stopped the fight and offered peace to everyone. All the people acknowledged him and took oaths and became baptized. After that King Knútr settled in his kingdom and wanted to keep Oddr by his side at all costs. Here is what Oddr answered to this proposition:

‘I haven’t found before Hungarians,
from two kings a vigorous looking,
ruler whose claim of inheritance,
I honestly wanted to follow.’

Chapter 36

Oddr has stayed there for a while until got bored in some months. He said he could no longer delay his department. The king tried much to convince him to stay, but he would not want that.”¹⁰⁷¹

At first glance, the story seems to be a work of fiction, assembled by the anonymous author from several sources. The Hungarian storyline seems particularly implausible – not only because of the lack of names specific to Hungary (the kings of Hungary were given Scandinavian names), but also because of the regicide, the dual kingship and the unusually large influence of the legendary hero in Hungary. Due to the genre specificity of the *fornaldarsögur*, Oddr’s poem about Hungary is unfortunately not a first-hand, contemporaneous "proof" of the events recounted in the prose. However, as I will attempt to point out in the following, it is possible that the Hungarian episode of the saga drew from real historical events.

¹⁰⁷¹ The translation is based on the authoritative 1888 Boer edition of the saga: Richard Constant Boer (ed.), *Örvar-Odds saga* (Leiden: Brill, 1888), 117–39; for a more recent edition, see Richard Constant Boer (ed.), *Örvar-Odds saga* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1892), 65–7; Carl Christian Rafn (ed.), “Örvar-Odds saga”, in *Fornaldar Sögur Nordrlanda*, Vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Hartvig Fridrik Popp, 1829), 539–40. See also the poem separately Jónsson, *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigting*, Vol. 2/B, 337.

Manuscripts and (written) sources of the saga

Historiography in recent decades has called for a philological analysis of source texts as a whole, as opposed to simply classifying fragments of sources as authentic or non-credible. To understand why a particular source passage was included in a given work, we need to be aware of the narrative structure of the work as a whole and the wider context: who, where, when and, most importantly, why wrote the text (or passage) in question.

In this light, the composition of a narrative story and its changes are particularly important. It is no coincidence that several medieval narratives survived in different versions, and the codices that preserve them also contain other works. The compilation of a manuscript was hardly done in an *ad hoc* manner. The manuscripts containing Icelandic sagas are not compilations of randomly selected sagas, but conscious compositions in which the plot of the sagas is given new meaning. Similarly, it was important to change the events of a saga because of its hidden ideological messages. This process is well illustrated by the variants in the different manuscripts, which can often be so different from one another that it is questionable whether we should consider the two versions to be the same saga, or if it would be more appropriate to interpret them as two separate stories.¹⁰⁷² Both diachronic (examining the changes in the text) and synchronic (examining the composition of the manuscripts) philological methods are necessary to place the above source fragment in a broader context.

The *Örvar Odds saga* was one of the most popular and one of the first “legendary sagas” recorded in the Middle Ages. Its earliest manuscript dates from the fourteenth century and is based on a lost thirteenth-century original. The manuscript is known as Holm Perg 7 4to and is currently kept in the Royal Library of Sweden (*Kungliga bibliotek*) in Stockholm. The fate of the manuscript is unknown until it came into the possession of book collector Jorgen Seefeld, from whom it was acquired by the Swedish army in 1657–8.¹⁰⁷³ This is the very first Nordic manuscript to contain more than one “legendary sagas”. The first *fornaldarsaga* is preserved in the *Hauksbók* codex, also from the fourteenth century, but it contains only one such work, along with sagas of other genres, as well as natural geographical and theological works. The Holm Perg 7 4to is not just a collection of “legendary sagas”. It includes a fragment of *Egils saga*, which is a “family saga”, and a part of *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, which is part of the “chivalric saga” group. The appearance of these mixed-style works in one manuscript suggests that the “legendary saga” was not distinguished from other works by Icelanders in this period.¹⁰⁷⁴ (The genre became widespread in the fifteenth century.) The Holm Perg

¹⁰⁷² Hans Jacob Orning, “Legendary sagas as historical sources”, *Tabularia* 15 (2015): 60.

¹⁰⁷³ Vilhelm Gödel (ed.), *Katalog öfver Kong. Bibliotekets. Fornisländska och fornnorska handskrifter* (Stockholm: Kungliga biblioteket, 1897–1900), 45–7.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, “The Earliest Legendary Saga Manuscripts”, in *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Developments*, eds. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), 21–32.

7 4to contains the earliest variant of *Örvar Odds saga*, the “S-version”, but it is not the most well-known. The younger versions “A” (AM 343 4to) and “B” (AM 471 4to), which display striking differences, date from the fifteenth century.¹⁰⁷⁵ The “M-version” (AM 344a 4to), also early (but younger than “S”), represents a transition between the two very different variants of the saga (“A”, “B” and “S”). The most widely used modern critical edition and translation is based on version “A”.¹⁰⁷⁶

For us, the differences between the “A” and “S” versions are the most important, for two reasons; firstly, these two versions are the furthest apart in terms of text, and secondly, the Hungarian episode is known only from version “S”. The narrative of Version “A” differs from the original thirteenth-century story as of the arrival to the Holy Land. While, as we have seen, in “S” the next location after the Holy Land was Hungary, this was completely omitted from the younger “A” and “B” versions; the episode is replaced by an adventure with a vulture, the land of giants, and the endless battles with Ögmundr, Oddr’s eternal foe. The younger versions are also much longer than the earlier ones, and only pick up the original storyline again at the end of the saga, when Oddr becomes King of Hunland. In fact, Ögmundr is given a completely new role: while in version “S” we only meet him twice, in the newer versions he clearly becomes the other protagonist of the saga, Oddr’s invincible adversary.

Remnants of the Hungarian episode can also be found in version “A”, where Oddr again intervenes in the fight between two kings – now in France. However, the events here are different: the two kings are Hróar and Hjórolf (not Vilhjálmr and Knútr), who are not siblings but merely cousins. The throne was seized by Hróar, upon killing Hjórolf’s father, and in the battle he was killed not by Oddr’s sword (“S”) but by his arrow. The fifteenth-century copyists of the saga did not consider the Hungarian episode to be essential, so they changed its events and kept only certain elements of it in the narrative, inserting it somewhat awkwardly between the last battles with Ögmundr.

It begs the question, why was the Hungarian episode more significant in the original version? The answer to this can be found in the composition of the manuscript of the saga. The aforementioned Holm Perg 7 4to manuscript contains six texts, among which, in addition to *Örvar Odds saga*, three “legendary sagas” are also included: *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (The story of Gautrek’s son Hrolf),

¹⁰⁷⁵ There is also an “E version”, but this is usually considered a late variant of “A” and “B”. Fulvio Ferrari, “Gods, Warlocks and Monsters in the Örvar-Odds saga” in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles. Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York 6th–12th August 2006*, Vol. 1, eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst and Donata Kick (Durham: Brepols, 2006), 241. The links between the manuscripts were established by Boer in his preface to the saga. For changes in the stories, see also from him: Richard Constant Boer, “Über die Örvar-Odds saga”, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 8 (1892): 97–139; also Richard Constant Boer, “Weiteres zur Örvar-Odds saga”, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 8 (1892): 246–55.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Guðni Jónsson (ed.), “Örvar-Odds saga”, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 159–322; Paul Edwards and Hermann Pálsson (trans.), *Arrow-Odd: A Medieval Novel* (New York: University of New York Press, 1970); Paul Edwards, Hermann Pálsson (trans.), “Arrow-Odd”, in *Seven Viking Romances* (Suffolk: Penguin, 1985), 25–137.

Jómsvíkinga saga (The story of the Jómsvikings) and *Ásmundar saga kappabana* (The story of Ásmundr, slayer of champions). As I have already mentioned above, the manuscript also contains fragments of the chivalric work *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* (The story of Conrad, Emperor's Son) and a classic family saga, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*.¹⁰⁷⁷ What is worth pointing out is that the ideal of royal power is a central element in all the stories told in the manuscript. A particularly good example of this is that the only fragment that is included in the manuscript from the very long *Egil saga*, is the one in which the king of Norway, Haraldr *hárfagri* ('fairhair') (872–931?), takes control of most of Norway and his subjects serve him loyally.¹⁰⁷⁸ Another example is the also fragmentary *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which is much more permissive towards (Danish) kings than other versions, while the parts mocking the kings found in other versions have been left out.¹⁰⁷⁹

The early version of *Örvar Odds saga* also fits into this narrative technique, in which Oddr's conversion to Christianity and his service under various kings is a central element, which culminates in his becoming the Christian king of Hunland. The stories in the manuscript similarly glorify royal service. The historical reasons for this must be traced back to thirteenth-century Iceland, where the only way to make a career in the time of subservience to the Norwegian crown was through the royal (Norwegian) court.¹⁰⁸⁰ *Örvar Odds saga* and its episode in Hungary are inextricably linked to the conscious selection of the manuscript's sources and the corresponding saga fragments.

The question is, why Hungary is chosen as the location for the episode? For this, we need to study the sources of the text. The identity of the author of the saga (or manuscript) is often of great help, but as with sagas in general, we are again dealing with an unknown author.

The author of the saga used a wide range of written sources and oral accounts to create his work.¹⁰⁸¹ Regarding the wide historical, mythological and geographical spectrum of the story, many have commented that it is more of a work compiled at a desk than a collection of viking-age stories that

¹⁰⁷⁷ The manuscript was originally part of a larger book, only parts of which survived in manuscript AM 580 4to. The manuscript came into the collection of Árni Magnússon in 1706 from Christen Worm, later bishop of Sjælland. It contains four texts: the fragmentary *Elís saga ok Rósamundu* and the also fragmentary *Flóvents saga*, as well as two other Icelandic chivalric stories, *Bærings saga* and *Mágus saga*. *Mágus saga* was followed by the *Hrólfs saga Gautreksonar*, which is (now) part of Holm Perg 7 4to. The original book therefore contained several "chivalric" sagas. The first 19 folios and the end of the manuscript have disappeared. Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir and Veturlíði Óskarsson, "The Manuscripts of Jómsvíkinga saga. A Survey", *Scripta Islandica* 65 (2014): 16–9.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Nordal (ed.), *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, 3–14.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir, "Erjár gerðir Jómsvíkinga sögu", *Gripla* 28 (2017): 73–102; Jóhannesdóttir and Óskarsson, "The Manuscripts of Jómsvíkinga saga", 18.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Tulinus, *The Matter of the North*, 160–2; Fulvio Ferrari, "Mouvance des Textes und Feudale Reinterpretation. Das Beispiel der Örvar-Odds saga", in *Neue Ansätze in der Mittelalterphilologie – Nye veier i middelalderfilologien*, ed. Susanne Kramarz-Bein (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 207–15.

¹⁰⁸¹ On the sources of the saga see Martin Arnold, "„Við þik sættumsk ek aldri". Örvar-Odds saga and the Meanings of Ögmundur Eyþjófsbani", in *Making History. Essays on the forndalarsögur*, eds. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: Viking Society for Northern research, 2010), 85–7; Paul Edwards and Hermann Pálsson (trans.), "Sources and parallels of Arrow-Odd", in *Seven Viking Romances* (Suffolk: Penguin, 1985), 282–8.

derive from Norwegian oral tradition.¹⁰⁸² Among the written models is the *Heimskringla* composed by the thirteenth-century Icelandic oligarch Snorri Sturluson, which tells the stories of the Norwegian kings.¹⁰⁸³ The Norse-Sámi and Finnish encounters and trade scenes of the kings' saga, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, written by Snorri's nephew Sturla Þórðarson, also inspired Oddr's adventures in the Baltic region.¹⁰⁸⁴ Also related to this theme is the journey of the Norwegian Ohthere. Ohthere was a Norwegian merchant in the service of Alfred the Great (871–99) in the late ninth century, who reported on his trade journeys. This is the earliest surviving record of a trading activity in the northern territories and the Baltic, which the author of the *Örvar Odds saga* may also have known.¹⁰⁸⁵

The saga also shows intertextual links with other sagas of roughly the same period, although it is often doubtful which story had an influence on the other. The hero of *Norna-Gests þáttur*, a short legendary story incorporated into one of the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason, rejects pagan prophecy and converts to Christianity the same way as Odd does.¹⁰⁸⁶ Next is the battle with the berserkers on the island of Samsø, which was maintained by both the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus and the legendary saga *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.¹⁰⁸⁷ Judging by the characters that appear in the saga – princess Silkisif (*dróttning*) or knight Jólfr (*karl*) – and the adjective *viðförull* ('far-travelled'), the author of the saga may have been familiar with *Yngvars saga víðförla* in which the same characters also appear.¹⁰⁸⁸ The saga was written in the twelfth century and takes place in what is now Eastern Europe.

The Hungarian episode is also partly based on knowledge obtained from written sources. According to *Magnússona saga* in *Heimskringla*, the King of Norway, Sigurðr Jórsalafari, like Oddr, travelled the Sicily–Jerusalem–Syria route, while also passing through Hungary. The episode, however, with its two kings, the civil war and the vikings entering into Hungarian service, differs sharply from the *Heimskringla*'s laconic royal itinerary:

¹⁰⁸² Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1997), 358; Arnold, "“Við þik sættumsk ek aldri”, 86.

¹⁰⁸³ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Vol. 1–3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit, no. 26–28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002).

¹⁰⁸⁴ Þorleifur Hauksson, Sverrir Jakobsson and Tor Ulset (eds.), *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, Vol. 1, Íslensk fornrit, no. 31 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2013), 252–3, 271.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Alan S. C. Cross (trans.), *The Terfinnas and Beormas of Ohthere* (London: Viking Society for Northern research, 1981). It was also suggested that Oddr himself was the historical Ohthere. Boer, *Örvar-Odds saga*, 102–5; Nora Kershaw Chadwick, *The beginnings of Russian history: An inquiry into sources* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1946), 147. However, this theory was not supported by modern researchers.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Carl Christian Rafn (ed.), "Sögubáttur af Norna-gesti", in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda*, Vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Hærdvig Fríðrek Popp, 1829), 311–42.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum, History of the Danes*, Vol. 1, ed. Kastren Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 344–5; Carl Christian Rafn (ed.), "Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs", in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda*, Vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Hærdvig Fríðrek Popp, 1829), 419.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Emil Olson (ed.), *Yngvars saga víðförla. Jámte ett bihang om Ingvarsinskrifterna* (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1912); Guðni Jónsson (ed.), "Yngvars saga víðförla", in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 423–59.

“Sigurðr konungr brot af Miklagarði [...] fór útan fyrst á Bolgaraland ok þá um Ungaraland ok um Pannóníam ok um Sváfa ok Býjaraland. Ear fann hann Lózariúm keisara af Rúmaborg, ok fagnaði hann honum forkunnar vel, fekk honum leiðtoga allt um sitt ríki ok lét halda þeim torg, svá sem þeir þurftu til allra kaupa.”¹⁰⁸⁹

“Sigurðr left Constantinople [...] he first went to Bulgaria then through Hungary, Pannonia, Swabia and Bavaria. There he met with Lothar, emperor of Rome, who favoured him in a warm welcome, gave him a guide through all his kingdom and let them hold a market such as they need for any purchases.” (Translation mine)

From a strict textual philological point of view, one could say that the compiler of the *Örvar Odds saga* has taken the route from the story of Sigurðr Jórsalafari, while simply fabricating the events that happened there to emphasise his message – the glorification of the Christian monarchy – with another exotic location.

It is not inconceivable, however, that the events are based on real Viking Age experience, which the author of the saga mixed up or deliberately altered. In order to test this hypothesis, we need to assess the extent to which the author drew on oral tradition and his knowledge of contemporary Eastern Europe. And finally, we need to compare what is described in the saga with what we know from other historical sources, examining the probability of whether Scandinavian warriors might have been involved in the internal wars between the Hungarian lords in the late Viking period.

Sources of the saga based on oral tradition

What is certain is that the figure of Örvar Oddr and some of the stories identified with him are not the creation of the author(s) of the saga, but are based on earlier oral accounts. Oddr is known from other sources, which have been pointed out by several researchers. Saxo Grammaticus mentions the hero identified with Oddr as Arvaroddus, who fights with berserkers on the island of Samsø.¹⁰⁹⁰ Oddr also appears in two other sources written in Old Norse, describing him as a participant in the Battle of Bravellir in Norway in the mid-eighth century (*Brávallapula*, *Sögubrot af nokkrum*

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Magnússona saga* 254. Sagas and geographical works often use Roman names for geographical units. We do not know exactly which territory they meant by Pannonia, but the term is not the same as Hungary. Rudolf Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 257.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 344.

fornkonungum).¹⁰⁹¹ The two sources were known to Saxo too: he mentions Oddr by name and suggests that he comes from Jæren in Norway.¹⁰⁹² The drinking contest in the court of King Herraud in chapter 40 of the saga may also have been inspired by earlier stories told at Viking feasts.¹⁰⁹³ Thus, the figure of Odd must have been the work of conscious construction, and the author not only had plenty of written sources at his disposal, but also various oral traditions.

The framework of the saga – the pagan prophecy and its consequences – also derives from oral tradition, and is based on events in Eastern Europe. The pagan prophecy of a horse that causes the hero's demise can be paralleled with the story of Oleg from the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, in which Oleg, Grand Prince of the Kievan Rus, also falls victim to a snake crawling out of his horse's skull.¹⁰⁹⁴ The parallel between the two stories has long been well known. Most scholars agree that the story of Oleg was the model for the saga of Örvir Oddr, and not the other way round. The motif itself can probably be traced back to Turkish origins in the steppe, but it was also known in Byzantium, from where it could have been taken to the Kievan Rus by the Varangians who served there, and from there it was transmitted to Scandinavia.¹⁰⁹⁵ Prince Oleg (known as Helgi in Old Norse) was also Scandinavian, so it is not surprising that the story was so popular in the Nordic world. The episode also provides an excellent example of oral traditions reaching Scandinavia from Eastern Europe and were known to the editors of *Örvir Odds saga*.

Unfortunately, few stories like Oleg's have been recorded. The main reason for this is that in the eastern half of the continent, vikings from the Swedish territories were more active, who did not leave behind literary sources similar to the Icelandic sagas.¹⁰⁹⁶ At the same time, Swedish runestones documented journeys to the East, confirming the historical origins of other fictional saga characters similar to Oddr, such as Yngvarr, who according to his saga sailed down the rivers of Russia and died in the mysterious *Serkland* (somewhere in the Muslim-inhabited areas).¹⁰⁹⁷

There was also some knowledge of Eastern Europe in the more distant parts of the Nordic world, both during the high and late Middle Ages. Some of this knowledge derived from Viking Age events, as evidenced by *Eymundar þáttir hringsonar*, which summarises the story of a viking mercenary group

¹⁰⁹¹ Carl Christian Rafn (ed.), “Sögubrot af nokkrum fornkönungum í Dana ok Svía veldi”, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda*, Vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Hærdvig Fridrek Popp, 1829), 381. The *Bráavallapula* survived only in Saxo's Latin prose transcription.

¹⁰⁹² Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 532–3, n. 1, 550–5.

¹⁰⁹³ Lars Lönnroth, “The Double Scene of Arrow Oddr's Drinking Contest”, in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, eds. Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), 94–119.

¹⁰⁹⁴ PVL 20.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Elena Mel'nikova: “The death in the horse's skull. The interaction of Old Russian and Old Norse literary tradition”, in *Gudar på jorden. Festschrift till Lars Lönnroth*, eds. Stina Hansson and Mats Malm (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2000), 153–68; Adolf Stender-Petersen, “The Byzantine Prototype to the Varangian story of the Hero's Death through his Horse”, in Adolf Stender-Petersen, *Varangica* (Aarhus: Bianco Lunos, 1953), 181–8; Chadwick, *The beginnings of Russian history*, 145, 156–60.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Hraundal, *The Rus in the Arabic sources*, 170.

¹⁰⁹⁷ For the most detailed comparison of the saga with historical sources, see Jonathan Shepard, “Yngvarr's expedition to the east”; on Serkland, see: Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 103–7.

operating in the eleventh-century Kievan Rus.¹⁰⁹⁸ Despite the fact that the story was recorded in the fourteenth century, its events can be paralleled with those of the PVL, which describes a period of internal warfare during the time of Yaroslav the Wise.¹⁰⁹⁹ There is also a wealth of information on Eastern Europe in the kings' sagas.¹¹⁰⁰ In the newer, "A" version of *Örvar Odds saga*, the author demonstrates his detailed knowledge of Eastern Europe by listing the major Rus' cities (at this time) including Murom, Rostov, Suzdal, Novgorod, Polotsk and Kiev (in their Old Norse names: *Móramar*, *Ráðstófa*, *Súrsdal*, *Hólmgarðr*, *Palteskjuborg*, and *Kænugarðr*).¹¹⁰¹

This list was left out of version "S", but this does not mean that the authors of the early version did not have geographical knowledge of the region. As I have mentioned above, the route taken by Sigurðr Jórsalafari was known to the editors of the early version. This route is also confirmed by other Nordic sources, mainly by geographical works, such as *Leiðir*, which is contemporary with the "S" manuscript of the saga: "From Saxony one travels on foot to Hungary, and from there as he wishes, East to Rus' or Greece, the city of Constantinople and from there to Jerusalem" ("Af saxlandi er farit fæti til ungara landz & þadan hvort er fara vill i garda austr eda út y grikland til miklagardz borga & sva til Jorsala").¹¹⁰² Although we cannot confirm this due to the unreliability of later sources, it is possible that the King of Denmark, Erik I Evergood (1095–103), also used this known pilgrimage route to reach the Holy Land, which was reopened in the eleventh century.¹¹⁰³ Hungary (*Ungaraland*) is mentioned as a geographical unit in several Icelandic sagas without any particular commentary, while other fourteenth-century Icelandic cosmographical works quite accurately identify it as a neighbour of Thrace and Bulgaria.¹¹⁰⁴ Consequently, the authors of Holm Perg 7 4to have had access to several sources concerning the conditions in Eastern Europe. The fact that four of the six sagas in the manuscript (*Konráðs saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Ásmundar saga* and the *Örvar Odds saga*) are, besides others, situated in Eastern European locations as well, suggests an interest of the manuscript composers in this.

Since the manuscript of Holm Perg 7 4to is thought¹¹⁰⁵ to bear the marks of three scribes, it is not inconceivable that one of them may have had access to Eastern European accounts similar to the story of Oleg. These may have travelled to the far north from Scandinavian warriors serving in Hungary,

¹⁰⁹⁸ Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Carl Rikard Unger (eds.), "Eymundar þáttir Hringssonar", in *Flateyjarbok. En samling af norske kongesagaer*, Vol. 2 (Christiania: P. T. Mallings, 1862), 118–34.

¹⁰⁹⁹ PVL 58–65.

¹¹⁰⁰ Glazyrina, "Information about Eastern Europe in Old Norse sagas".

¹¹⁰¹ Boer, *Örvar-Odds saga*, 187.

¹¹⁰² Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie*, 594.

¹¹⁰³ Ildar Garipzanov, "Early Christian Scandinavia and the Problem of Eastern Influences", in *Early Christianity on the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks*, eds. Ildar Garipzanov and Oleksiy Tolochko (Kiev: Ruthenica, 2011), 22.

¹¹⁰⁴ Eshter M. Metzenthin, *Die Länder- und Völkernamen im Altisländischen Schrifttum* (Pennsylvania: Bryn Mawr, 1941), 112–3; Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie*, 445–6, 453, 461–2; Szántó, "Skandináv források adatai".

¹¹⁰⁵ Jóhannesdóttir and Óskarsson, "The Manuscripts of Jómsvíkinga saga", 16.

until they were incorporated into this version of the saga in a distorted form, retaining certain elements and altering or omitting others. But is there any record of this supposed service in Hungary in other sources?

The Hungarian background

That Scandinavian mercenaries were employed in Hungary already during the reigns of Grand Prince Géza and King Saint Stephen have been discussed formerly in chapter 3. However, even if we cannot exclude the possibility, the hypothesis that the author(s) of *Örvar Odds saga* may have heard of such cases cannot be supported even by circumstantial evidence.

However, the historical situation may have also created the opportunity for some viking warriors to enter into service in Hungary at a slightly later date, in the Late Viking Age, around the mid-eleventh century. This period of Hungarian history is characterized by a deep political crisis caused by the passing of Saint Stephen without a legitimate son. Succession struggles developed into a series of internal wars. With the sudden death of his son Emeric in 1031 during a buck hunt, Stephen looked for a successor in his nephew, Peter Orseolo, son of the doge of Venice and Stephen's sister. To secure Peter's accession, Stephen had blinded his cousin Vazul, his closest male relative and expectant to the throne. This outcome made Vazul's sons, Béla, Andrew and Levente flee into Poland and the Kyvian Rus'. When Peter took the throne (1038–41) he faced internal opposition from Magyar lords and was deposed by the former count, Samuel Aba (1041–4). Peter, however, returned to the country with the aid of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry III (1046–56), and subsumed the throne once more (1044–6). Peter's German vassalage triggered newer uprisings and plots culminating in a pagan revolt and the calling back of Vazul's sons from exile. Andrew and Levente returned from the Kyvian Rus', and although Levente was still pagan, Andrew already have been Christianized, thus allying himself with the pagan insurgents was a forced move. With the defeat of Peter and the sudden death of Levente, Andrew, the first of his name (1046–60) assumed the throne. Now not in need of his pagan allies, he forcefully put an end to the uprising and started to punish pagan practices with death, and turning the country (back) to Christianity. As preparation for the expected German retaliation for Peter's deposition and death, Andrew rallied support: he called back his other brother, Béla, from Poland and made him his official heir and duke of the country, a title going with one third of the country's revenues. Together they successfully repelled German attacks in 1051 and 1052. Afterwards, Andrew proclaimed his own son, Solomon, king in 1057, in spite of his previous promise of the throne to his brother. Confrontation between the two brothers became inevitable, and in his fear, Béla once again fled the country. Returning with Polish support, Béla managed to beat Andrew

on the battlefield, who subsequently died very shortly thereafter in unsure circumstances. With Andrew's death, Béla finally became king of the country (1060–3).¹¹⁰⁶

This is the period when the plot of the *Örvar Odds saga* can best be aligned with the events in Hungary; the 'reign of the two kings' (Peter and Andrew, Andrew and Levente, Andrew and Béla?), the 'regicide' (Peter and Andrew, and even Samuel Aba died shortly after the final lost battle), and the arrival of Scandinavian mercenaries in Hungary (Andrew's and Levente's stay in Kiev). It is also possible that the story originates from members of King Sigurðr's entourage crossing through Hungary, who may have heard of similar events at the court of King Coloman the Learned (1095–116) involving Prince Álmos. The two brothers were at odds with each other throughout, and features discussed above – the reign of two brothers, civil war conditions, foreign aid – resurfaced during their confrontation. Álmos was duke, namely the second in rank in the country and continuously sought foreign help from the Germans and Poles to undermine Coloman's rule. Although he was excused by Coloman on several occasions, a new coup excogitated by Álmos around 1113 (or 1115) finally prompted Coloman to blind his brother. The blinded Álmos sought refuge in Byzantium. His incitement there, again, was in the background of Hungarian–Byzantine wars between 1127–9, now fought against Coloman's son, the new king Stephen II (1116–31).¹¹⁰⁷

Due to the distance in time and space from the events, all this information – whichever period inspired the events – was of course mixed up in the process of translating the oral traditions into written form, and was adjusted to the current ideological message of the work, as the editors of the saga made changes. If the employment of Scandinavian warriors in Hungary in the eleventh century could be verified, it would also strengthen the credibility of this part of the saga. The best opportunity for the vikings to enter into Hungarian service may have been provided by the exile of the later King Andrew I to Kiev in the 1030s. More recently Márta Font looked into the matter, suggesting that through his marriage in Kiev, Andrew came back to Hungary with a Rus' entourage to fight for the throne.¹¹⁰⁸

The assumption may be supported by the fact that Andrew's patron, Yaroslav the Wise, Grand Prince of Kiev, was himself of half-Scandinavian descent through his mother, and had close ties with the North: his wife was Ingegerð, daughter of King Óláfr *skautkonungr* ('the Swede') (995–1022), while he himself hired Varangian mercenaries on several occasions during conflicts with his father

¹¹⁰⁶ For the events of public history, see Pál Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen. A History of Medieval Hungary, 895–1526* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 29–32; Gábor Varga, *Ungarn und das Reich vom 10. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert. Das Herrscherhaus der Árpáden zwischen Anlehnung und Emanzipation* (München: Verlag Ungarisches Institut, 2003), 99–125.

¹¹⁰⁷ Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen*, 34–5, 49–50.

¹¹⁰⁸ Márta Font, "I. András és Bölcs Jaroszlav", *Világtörténet* 37, no. 4 (2015): 607–24.

and brothers.¹¹⁰⁹ The chronicle of the Saxon traveller and bishop Thietmar of Merseburg also reported that in 1018 Kiev was swarming with Danes.¹¹¹⁰ The Varangians in the Kievan Rus were granted special rights in Yaroslav's court according to the articles of the first Russian collection of laws, the *Russkaya Pravda*.¹¹¹¹ The Varangian service in Kiev and the viking connections of Prince Yaroslav are well known from both the Old Slavic chronicles and the Old Norse sagas.¹¹¹² The later King of Norway, Haraldr *harðráði*, stayed with the prince for a time and, according to his saga, married one of his daughters, Elisiv.¹¹¹³ Perhaps only a coincidence, and definitely post-dates Andrew's Kievan exile, in 2022 a silver penning of Haraldr was found in Várdomb (Tolna county) in Hungary, at the medieval village of Kesztlőc, which already existed in the mid-eleventh century. Such coins with a triquetra of the Norwegian king are extremely rare outside Norway and serves as indirect evidence for the Northern contacts of Hungary, even if it arrived through intermediary channels.¹¹¹⁴

Therefore, Andrew must have met Varangians in Kiev, and it is only logical to assume that some of the fighters accompanied him to Hungary. No attempt has yet been made to verify this. It is possible, however, that the memory of the Scandinavian mercenaries who accompanied Andrew was preserved in the form of two names of unclear origin in a Hungarian source.

The 'vikings' of the Illuminated Chronicle

One of our most valuable sources regarding the events of Hungarian history of the eleventh century is the so-called *Chronicle Compilation* written in the fourteenth century.¹¹¹⁵ Research distinguishes between two versions of the surviving text: the shorter codices that belong to the so-called *Buda Chronicle* family, and the longer, the *Illuminated Chronicle* family. Numerous works have been written on the manuscripts of this composition and the relationship between the different versions of the text.¹¹¹⁶ The author of the *Illuminated Chronicle*, named after the oldest and most ornate

¹¹⁰⁹ *Óláfs saga Helga*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Vol. 2, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit, no. 27 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 144–8; PVL 58–67.

¹¹¹⁰ Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Episcopi Chronicon*, 530.

¹¹¹¹ George Vernadsky (trans.), *Medieval Russian Laws* (New York: Octagon, 1979), 27–8, 38–9.

¹¹¹² Birnbaum, "Yaroslav's Varangian Connection"; Samuel Hazzard Cross, "Yaroslav the Wise in Norse Tradition," *Speculum* 4, no. 2 (1929): 177–97; The mixed character of the court in Kiev is supported by the contemporary names and family connections that can be linked to it: József Laszlovszky, "Skóciai Szent Margit és az angol–magyar kapcsolatok," in Attila Bárány, József Laszlovszky and Zsuzsanna Papp: *Angol–magyar kapcsolatok a középkorban*, Vol. 1 (Máriabesnyő: Attraktor, 2008), 76–8.

¹¹¹³ *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Vol. 3, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit no. 28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 89–91.

¹¹¹⁴ Máté Varga and András K. Németh, "Harald Hardråde norvég király érméje a középkori Kesztlőcről (Várdomb, Tolna vármegye)," in *Vikingek a Kárpát-medencében*, ed. János Dani and Csete Katona (Debrecen: Déri Museum, forthcoming).

¹¹¹⁵ "Chronici Hungarici compositio saeculi XIV", in *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum*, Vol. 1, ed. Emericus Szentpétery (Budapest: Nap, 1937–1938), 217–505.

¹¹¹⁶ Norbert Kersken, "The Illuminated Chronicle in the context of medieval Hungarian historiography", in *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv. The Illuminated Chronicle. Chronicle of the Deeds of the Hungarians from the Fourteenth-Century Illuminated Codex*, eds. and trans. János M. Bak and László Veszprémy, Central European

manuscript of the chronicle collection, worked, in his own words, from “many chronicles” (*diversis cronicis*), thus its information traces back to the time of events.¹¹¹⁷ The manuscripts of the family of the *Illuminated Chronicle* provide much disputed, but first-rate information about the reign of King Andrew I. These details are not included in the *Buda Chronicle* family. Chapters 89 and 90 of the *Illuminated Chronicle* tell the story of the campaigns of 1051 and 1052 of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry III against the Hungarians. The first of these – erroneously mentioned earlier in the chronicle, but happened chronologically later in fact – was the German attack of 1052, of which the source preserves a famous anecdote of Hungary history. According to this, the fleet of the German army attacking Bratislava was anchored on the Danube and a brave man named Zotmund drilled holes in the German ships, thus forcing the German army, which was left without supplies, to end the siege:

“Eo tempore Teutonicorum rex cum magno exercita obsedit castrum Poson volens iniuriam Petri vindicare et Hungariam suo domino subiugare. Extruxit autem multas machinas bellicas ad pugnandum castrum, et per octo ebdomadas obsidendo nihil profecit. Venerat enim predictus rex navigio ad obsidendum castrum Poson. Tunc Hungari, qui in castro erant, natatorie prudentissimum invenerunt hominem nomine Zothmund, quem noctis in silentio ad naves imperatoris miserunt, qui suba qua veniens subito aqua plene facte sunt, et potentia Theutonicorum contrita est, et sic effeminati enervatique viribus reversi sunt ad propria. Multi enim milites erant in Poson, sed precipui erant inter eos Woytech, Endre, Vylungard, Vrosa et Martinus, qui cotidie cum Teutonicis dimicabant acriter.”

“At that time the king of the Germans besieged the castle of Pressburg with a large army, wishing to avenge the injuries done to Peter and to subject Hungary to his dominion. He therefore erected many machines of war to subdue the castle, but after eight weeks of siege he had accomplished nothing. For the aforesaid king had come by boat to lay siege to the castle of Pressburg; but the Hungarians who were in the castle found a man, Zotmund by name, who was a most skilful swimmer, and in the night they sent him

Medieval Texts, no. 9 (Budapest: CEU Press, 2018), ix–xxiv; Sándor Domanovszky, “Praefatio”, in *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum*, Vol. 1, ed. Emericus Szentpétery (Budapest: Nap, 1937–1938), 219–37; Sándor Domanovszky, “A Budai Krónika I–III”, *Századok* 36 (1902): 615–30, 729–52, 810–83. Gyula Kristó, “Anjou-kori krónikáink”, *Századok* 101 (1967): 457–504; Gyula Kristó and Ferenc Makk, “Krónikáink keletkezéstörténetéhez” *Történelmi Szemle* 15 (1972): 198–203; Gyula Kristó, *Magyar historiográfia I. Történetírás a középkori Magyarországon*, (Budapest: Osiris, 2002), 78–88; Gábor Thoroczkay, “Krónikakompozíció”, in *Magyar művelődéstörténeti lexikon*, Vol. 6, eds. Péter Kőszeghy and Tamás Zsuzsanna (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2006), 322–4; Balázs Kertész, “A 14. századi magyarországi krónikaszerkesztmények utóélete a késő középkorban”, *Századok* 150 (2016): 473–99.

¹¹¹⁷ “Chronici Hungarici”, 239. For the most recent information on the authorship of the *Illuminated Chronicle* (with further references), see Dániel Bácsatyai, “Jogi műveltség, történetírás és kancellária a 14. századi Magyarországon”, *Történelmi Szemle* 57 (2015): 607–18.

silently to the emperor's ships, and swimming under water he made holes in all the ships, so that they immediately filled with water. Thus the power of the Germans was broken and, weakened and enervated, they returned home. There were many brave warriors in Pressburg, but the chief among them were Vojtech, Andrew, Vylungard, Urosa and Martin, who fought fiercely with the Germans every day.”¹¹¹⁸

Both the plot of the episode and the names of the characters in it can provide important insights into the problem under discussion. I would like to propose that the names of two of the warriors, Zotmund, the ‘protagonist’, and Vylungard, the name of another warrior, are of possible Old Norse origin and therefore indicate Varangian mercenaries in Andrew's service.

The *Buda Chronicle*, which shares a common source with the *Illuminated Chronicle* and at its core is identical to it, but is shorter in length, does not mention the above-quoted episode, only that the Germans abandoned the siege after eight weeks.¹¹¹⁹ Three of the five manuscripts belonging to the family of the *Illuminated Chronicle*: the *Illuminated Chronicle* itself, dated to around 1358, the *Csepreghy Codex* of 1431 and the *Béldi Codex* dated to the early sixteenth century, contain various transcriptions of the names. These were indeed corrupted during transcription, as a result of which they have survived in the following variations: 1. *Illuminated Chronicle*: Zothmund, Vylungard (*Fig. 16.; Fig. 17.*); 2. *Csepreghy Codex*: Zothmond, Vilungard; 3. *Béldi Codex*: Zothmond, Vilingard.¹¹²⁰

Little to none is known about these two names, and this is the only work in which they appear. The *Árpád-period nomenclature* (a scholarly collection of all names from the period) knows them only from the *Chronicle Composition*, and there is no trace of them in any other Germanic dictionary of names.¹¹²¹ The closest information is provided by the *Book of Hungarian Surnames*, which considers the name Zotmund to be of Germanic origin, and explains it by the combination of the

¹¹¹⁸ “Chronici Hungarici”, 346–7; translation from: *Chronica de Gestis Hungarorum e Codice Picto Saec. xiv. The Illuminated Chronicle. Chronicle of the Deeds of the Hungarians from the Fourteenth-Century Illuminated Codex*, eds. and trans. János M. Bak and László Veszprémy, Central European Medieval Texts, no. 9 (Budapest: CEU Press, 2018), 166–9.

¹¹¹⁹ “Chronici Hungarici”, 346.

¹¹²⁰ “Chronici Hungarici”, 346.

¹¹²¹ Katalin Fehértói, *Onomasticon Hungaricum Nomina propria personarum aetatis Arpadianae (1000–1301)* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2004), 812, 858; Gottfried Schramm, *Namenschatz und Dichtersprache. Studien zu den Zweigliedrigen Personennamen der Germanen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957); Ernst Förstemann, *Altdeutsches Namenbuch*, Vol. 1–2 (Nordhausen: Verlag von Ferd. Förstemann, 1856); Lena Peterson, *Lexikon över urnordiska personnamn*. 2004. (<https://bit.ly/2UJSwpg>, accessed 1 January 2019); Lena Peterson, *Nordiskt runnamnslexikon* (Uppsala: Språk- och folkminnesinstitutet, 2007); it is unknown among the Germanic peoples of late antiquity, see Moritz Schönfeld, *Wörterbuch der Altgermanischen Personen- und Völkernamen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1911); Hermann Reichert, *Lexikon der Altgermanischen Namen*, Vol. 1. *Text* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1987); moreover, the names of the Anjou period, which often date back to the Árpád period, do not include them either: Mariann Slíz, *Anjou-kori személynévtár (1343–1359)* (Budapest: Magyar Nyelvtudományi Társaság, 2017).

words ‘fast’ and ‘protection’.¹¹²² There can indeed be no dispute that both names are of Germanic origin and are dithematic, where both parts of the word combination have their own meaning.¹¹²³ The second part of the names, *-mund* and *-gard*, confirm this beyond doubt. It is strange – but perhaps not coincidental – that both of these suffixes also bear the meaning ‘protector’ or ‘defender’.¹¹²⁴ Male names ending in *-mund* (Old Norse *mundr*) are very common in Scandinavian nomenclature, but Old Norse male names ending in *-gard* (Old Norse *garðr*) are also well documented,¹¹²⁵ although they are not known from any source in these particular combinations.¹¹²⁶

Identifying the prefixes of the two names may provide a clue to solving this problem. I believe it is possible that both names are to be regarded as “descriptive names”. The prefix of the name Vylungard can be the singular first person *vil* or the plural first person *viljum* form of the Old Norse verb *vilja* meaning ‘to want’ or ‘willing’.¹¹²⁷ Together with the Old Norse form of the name *-garðr*, the full name would thus denote a person “willing to protect”, i.e. a bodyguard. As a linguistic construction, this would not be a unique feature. A later form of the name, Willigard (Willigart, Willegart) is known in Germanic form with the same composition and meaning, although it should

¹¹²² János Ladó and Ágnes Bíró, *Magyar utónévkönyv* (Budapest: Vince, 2016), 152.

¹¹²³ Béla Kálmán, *A nevek világa* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1973), 26–30; Schramm, *Namenschatz und Dichtersprache*; Lena Peterson, “The Development of Proto-Nordic Personal Names”, in *The Nordic Languages. An International Handbook of the History of the North Germanic Language*, Vol. 1, eds. Oskar Bandle, Kurt Braunmüller, Ernst Håkon Jahr, Allan Karker, Hans-Peter Naumann and Ulf Telemann, Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, no. 22 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 665–6; Oskar Bandle, “Developments of Personal Names from Ancient Nordic to Old Nordic”, in *The Nordic Languages. An International Handbook of the History of the North Germanic Language*, Vol. 1, eds. Oskar Bandle, Kurt Braunmüller, Ernst Håkon Jahr, Allan Karker, Hans-Peter Naumann and Ulf Telemann, Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, no. 22 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 746; Oskar Bandle, “Mono- and dithematic personal names in Old Germanic”, in *Probleme der Namenbildung. Rekonstruktion von Eigennamen und der ihnen zugrundeliegenden Appellative. Akten eines internationalen Symposiums in Uppsala 1–4. September 1986*, ed. Thorsten Andersson, *Nomina Germanica*, no. 18 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, 1988), 121–30.

¹¹²⁴ The suffix *-mund* derives from Old Germanic **mundō* (‘hand’). Vladimir Orel, *A Handbook of Germanic Etymology* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 275. The Old Norse word *mund* has retained this meaning too. Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 303; its other meaning is ‘protection’. Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 395; Förstemann, *Altdeutsches Namenbuch*, 940; The original form of *-gard* is the Old Norse **gardaz*, originally meaning ‘courtyard’, ‘house’, which is also preserved by the Old Norse *-garðr*. Orel, *A Handbook of Germanic Etymology*, 126; Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 161; from it derives the Old Norse *Garðar*, used for Rus’ territories and also meaning ‘fortress’. Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 191–2. When used as a suffix in proper nouns, it takes on the meaning of ‘protector’. de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 156; Rikard Hornby, “Fornavne i Danmark i middelalderen”, in *Personnamn*, ed. Assar Janzén, *Nordisk Kultur*, no. 7 (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1947), 196; Assar Janzén, “De fornsvenska personnamnen”, in *Personnamn*, ed. Assar Janzén, *Nordisk Kultur*, no. 7 (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1947), 266.

¹¹²⁵ Since *-mundr* is a very common surname suffix, it is not necessary to give special references to it. The *-garðr* is much less common. For an overview of its occurrences, see Peterson, *Nordiskt runnamnslexikon*, 230, 320; Janzén, *De fornsvenska personnamnen*, 266; also known as *Garðar/Garðr* (Icelandic) and *Garðarr* (Swedish) as a masculine name, see *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslensk fornrit*, no. 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1986), 458; Rafn (ed.), “Sögubrot af nokkrum fornkonúngum”, 379.

¹¹²⁶ They are not listed in the online collection *Dictionary of Medieval Names from European Sources* (<http://dmnes.org/>, accessed 5 January 2019).

¹¹²⁷ Cleasby and Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 706; Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 490–1.

be noted that it is a female name.¹¹²⁸ The word *Varangian*, also derives from a similar compound structure, the Old Norse *væringi*, which is composed of the words *vár* ('oath') and *gingi* ('companion, retainer'), and refers to a companion who swore an oath.¹¹²⁹ In its Old Slavonic form, the word *Varangian*, which originally denoted an occupation and ethnicity, is also found as a personal name in the pages of the PVL.¹¹³⁰

The name *Zotmund* may have been distorted by changes in the manuscript variations: the copiers of the original *Illuminated Chronicle* recorded it as *Zothmond*. In the case of the forms *-mund* and *-mond*, for example, we can observe the typical fluctuation in the spelling of *o* and *u* in the period.¹¹³¹ These distortions are probably responsible for that we cannot identify it with any known Germanic or Old Norse names. The original form of the word may be the same as the Old Norse *Thodmund* (*Þjóðmundr* in Old Norse) or *Sudmund* (*Suðmundr* in Old Norse). The latter is supported by the fact that the sound pairs *t* and *d* can thus alternate easily.¹¹³² The more contextually appropriate *Solmund* (*Sólmundr* in Old Norse), the *sól*- prefix of which means 'hall, house', could also be considered, and therefore this would also refer to the warrior element of Germanic escorts ('defender of the house / hall').¹¹³³ A chronicle in Latin, copied several times, by a chronicler(s) unfamiliar with the Old Norse language, cannot be expected to provide accurate spellings of the original names. Medieval European Latin (or other) sources are notable for transcribing Scandinavian names incorrectly, according to local pronunciation and spelling.¹¹³⁴ It is enough to think about Reginheri as standing for Ragnarr, Rollo for Hrólfr or Anlaf for Óláfr, but the list could be amended endlessly. The medieval Hungarian sources are no exception to this either, as they recorded other foreign names mostly inaccurately or in other forms.¹¹³⁵ Although from a linguistic point of view we cannot identify the two names with absolute certainty, the "descriptive name-effect" would explain why we do not find them in other

¹¹²⁸ Förstemann, *Altdeutsches Namenbuch*, 1307; in the case of Germanic names, it is common for a prefix or suffix to be associated with only one female or male name. For the Scandinavian aspects of this phenomenon, see Philip A. Shaw, "The Role of Gender in some Viking-Age Innovations in Personal Naming", *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011): 151–70; for example, female names with the suffix *-garðr* are much more common. See, Hornby, *Fornavne i Danmark*, 196; However, as it is also found in male names (see above), in our case it is not a reason for excluding it from the identification.

¹¹²⁹ Stender-Petersen, "Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes *væringi*".

¹¹³⁰ PVL 37.

¹¹³¹ Rudolf Szentgyörgyi, *A tihanyi apátság alapítólevele mint a magyar nyelvtörténeti kutatások forrása*, PhD dissertation (Budapest: ELTE-BTK Nyelvtudományi Doktori Iskola, 2010), 149–53.

¹¹³² According to the Grimm dictionary, for example, the forms *-sudd*, *-sudde* and *-sutte* are also found in several German dialects. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 1360, ([https:// bit.ly/2k2Qyjo](https://bit.ly/2k2Qyjo), accessed 20 January 2019).

¹¹³³ Peterson, *Nordiskt runnamnslexikon*, 186–7. These are far more probable than the Old High German *Zo(t)t*, which is a common word anyway and not part of a name, and is documented in the forms *zata*, *zota*, *zotta*, meaning 'fuzzy', 'shaggy', 'unkempt-haired', 'crest of a helmet' and 'hairball'. Gerhard Köbler, *Wörterbuch des althochdeutschen Sprachschatzes* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999), 208.

¹¹³⁴ Evert Meleforts, "The Development of Old Nordic Personal Names", in *The Nordic Languages. An International Handbook of the History of the North Germanic Language*, Vol. 1, eds. Oskar Bandle, Kurt Braunmüller, Ernst Håkon Jahr, Allan Karker, Hans-Peter Naumann and Ulf Teleman, *Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft*, no. 22 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 964.

¹¹³⁵ Katalin Fehértói, "Árpád-kori személynevek olvasatainak megbízhatóságáról", *Magyar Nyelv* 97, no. 4. (2001): 460–7.

sources. It cannot be ruled out that the occupation of the Varangians who stayed at Yaroslav's court and joined Andrew was (either by misunderstanding or intentionally) maintained as an anthroponym in Hungarian tradition. The descriptive naming tradition was still alive at that time in Hungary, meaning that some people were named after their profession.¹¹³⁶

The Scandinavian identification of the names can be supported by other contextual information in the text. The names of the other soldiers who accompanied Andrew are illustrative: while *Vojtech* was probably of Old Bohemian or Polish, *Urosa* and *Andrew* were probably of Slavic origin. While the origin of a given name is of course not identical with the ethnicity of its bearer, it is striking that the members of Andrew's entourage bear names associated with languages (Czech/Polish, Slavic, Scandinavian/Germanic) that coincide with the places of his exile (Bohemia/Poland and the Kievan Rus). It is of particular interest – though perhaps just a coincidence – that the prefix *woj-* (*woy-*) in *Vojtech* also has the meaning 'war, warrior'. Although *Urosa* may also be a form of the Hungarian word 'úr' ('lord') with the prefixes *a* and *s*, in this case it is more likely to be an adoption from Slavic. However, it can also be read as the *Russian* word *Wrus*, *Wros*, *Vrus*, *Vros*, ending with the Slavic *-a* diminutive. That is, it can denote someone who came from the Kievan Rus, and who was named by Hungarians (not using his original name) after his origin.¹¹³⁷

Following the criteria of source criticism, the historical existence of Zotmund and Vylungard is sometimes questioned.¹¹³⁸ It has been suggested in scholarly literature that chapters 89 and 90 of the chronicle contain chronological inaccuracies; it describes the two German campaigns in the wrong order, inaccurately dates the peace treaty with Henry III to 1052 and gives the wrong date for the later king, Solomon's wedding. The inaccuracies suggest that we are not dealing with a fourteenth-century transcription of an eleventh-century eyewitness' account. This is also supported by the fact that the etymological explanation of the mountain name Vértés ('armoured'), where the Germans threw off their armours to escape more easily, had already been established by the time the chronicle was written.¹¹³⁹ These inconsistencies, however, do not rule out the possibility that the chronicler was working from a source text that may have been, if not entirely, almost contemporaneous with the

¹¹³⁶ See, e.g. Dezső Pais, *Régi személyneveink jelentéstana* (Budapest: Magyar Nyelvtudományi Társaság, 1966), 21–4.

¹¹³⁷ For *Vojtech*, see Géza Bárczi, *A Tihanyi Apátság alapítólevele mint nyelvi emlék* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1951), 60; Aleksander Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1927), 629; Aleksandra Cieśli, *Słownik etymologiczno-motyacyjny staropolskich nazw osobowych*, Vol. 1 (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 2000), 348; For *Urosa*, see Géza Bárczi, *A magyar szókincs eredete* (Budapest: Pfeifer F., 1958), 132; János Melich, *Szláv jövevényszavaink*, Vol. 2 (Budapest: Pfeifer F., 1905), 129; Fehértói, *Árpád-kori személynévtár*, 783; The name *Endre* may also be of German origin. Cf. Ferenc Szilágyi, *Sokféle neveknek magyarázatja. Névnap szövejtő az év (majd) minden napjára* (Budapest: Minerva RTV 1987), 267–8.

¹¹³⁸ Many accept the existence of Zotmund. See, György Szabados, "The Hungarian National Defense during the German Wars 1030–1052", *Chronica* 6 (2006): 79–80; Csaba Szabó, "Die militärischen Aspekte der deutsch-ungarischen Beziehungen während der Salierzeit", *Ungarn-Jahrbuch* 21 (1995): 13.

¹¹³⁹ László Veszprémy, "Korhűség és forrásérték a magyar krónika egyes fejezeteiben", in *Arcana tabularii. Tanulmányok Solymosi László tiszteletére*, Vol. 2, eds. Attila Bányi, Gábor Dreska and Kornél Szovák (Debrecen: Kapitális, 2014), 809–15.

events.¹¹⁴⁰ In defence of the authenticity of the source fragment, it can be argued that the text corresponds to the eleventh-century charter material. The description of the treaty of Henry III mentioned above contains a known documentary formula, which suggests that such a document may have existed previously. In addition, and most importantly, the names of several of the honoured warriors – *Martin*, *Andrew* and *Vojtech* – are also mentioned in the 1055 establishing charter of Tihany.¹¹⁴¹

Zotmund and Vylungard were omitted from this list, so the founding charter of the abbey does not directly prove that they are real historical figures. However, Vylungard has absolutely no role in the story, and it is also incomprehensible why the chronicler would have chosen – if he relied on his own imagination – a completely foreign name such as Zotmund when he created the “diving episode”. Besides, the question arises: what ideological or other purpose would these names serve in the narrative of the chronicle composition at all? An analogous example concerns the Latin legend of Saint Ludmilla of Bohemia from the late tenth century. According to the story, the two assassins who executed Ludmilla were named Tunna and Gommon.¹¹⁴² Due to the Latin documentation, it is also difficult to determine the etymology of the two names, but most interpretations suggest that they are also Scandinavian.¹¹⁴³ Regardless whether the two names are of Scandinavian or Germanic origin, it would be difficult to explain why the author of the legend would “invent” two foreigners and their names for the story.¹¹⁴⁴ It is more likely – as in the case of Zotmund and Vylungard – that we are dealing with historical figures who were assigned to the court as foreign mercenaries.

There are also doubts about the military history of the two chapters. László Veszprémy pointed out that the “letter-trick”, misleading the Germans, in Chapter 90, is a common historiographical convention in the period under discussion.¹¹⁴⁵ Simultaneously, Veszprémy also doubts the historical authenticity of the “diver-episode”. The *Annales Altahenses*, which confirms the news of the German

¹¹⁴⁰ The compiler of the chronicle composition may have used a lost source called the *Old Gesta* (or *Old Chronicle*). Historians place the birth of the *Old Gesta* at the earliest during the reign of Solomon, and at the latest during the reign of Coloman. Few have assumed a layer from the time of Andrew I in the composition. For these, see Gábor Thoroczkay, “A magyar krónikairóadalom kezdeteiről”, in *Aktualitások a magyar középkorkutatásban*, eds. Márta Font, Tamás Fedeles and Gergely Kiss (Pécs: Pécsi Tudományegyetem BTK Középkori és Korajújkori Történeti Tanszék, 2010), 23–31; Dániel Bagi, “Béla és a pomerán. Megjegyzések a XIV. századi krónikakompozíció 79. fejezetéhez”, in *Aktualitások a magyar középkorkutatásban*, eds. Márta Font, Tamás Fedeles and Gergely Kiss (Pécs: Pécsi Tudományegyetem BTK Középkori és Korajújkori Történeti Tanszék, 2010), 295–306.

¹¹⁴¹ György Györffy, *Diplomata Hungariae antiquissima: accedunt epistolae et acta ad historiam Hungariae pertinentia* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992), 145–52; Bárczi, *A Tihanyi Apátság alapítólevele*, 12; József Gerics, “A krónikakutatás és az oklevéltan határán”, *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 3 (1974): 281–95; Tibor Szöcs, “A 14. századi krónikaszerkesztmény interpolációi és 11. századi okleveleink”, *Fons* 14 (2007): 59–95.

¹¹⁴² “Utrpení sv. Lidmily”, in *Fontes rerum Bohemicarum*, Vol. 1, ed. Josef Emler (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2004), 140–3.

¹¹⁴³ Walter, “Namnen Tunna och Gommon”; Ludvíkovský, “Tunna und Gommon”.

¹¹⁴⁴ Jaroslav Ludvíkovský, “Great Moravian Tradition in the 10th cent. Bohemia and *Legenda Christiani*”, in *Magna Moravia: sborník k 1100. výročí příchodu byzantské mise na Moravu*, ed. Josef Macůrek (Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1965), 540–1; Ludvíkovský, “Tunna und Gommon”, 171–88.

¹¹⁴⁵ Veszprémy, “Korhúség és forrásérték”, 813–4.

attack, does not mention Zotmund or his deed; the story was only preserved by a single foreign source, the fifteenth-century Bavarian humanist Aventinus, who himself worked from the *Chronicle Composition*. As Veszprémy goes on, the destruction of the ships may reflect a military practice of the time, whereby the retreating army would sink its own cargo ships to prevent them from falling into enemy hands.¹¹⁴⁶

It must also be pointed out, however, that drilling a hole into enemy ships was not an uncommon tactic during the Middle Ages: the method is suggested by several military treatises.¹¹⁴⁷ To what extent it was used in practice, and whether there were specialised individuals or even units for it, is, of course, another matter. In any case, divers have been performing military tasks since antiquity.¹¹⁴⁸ It should also be added that swimming played a very special role among the Scandinavians of the time. In the Icelandic sagas it was presented as a noble military virtue or trial. Closely related to swimming (although not separated from it in the sources) was the ability to “dive”. This can be seen in two forms. On the one hand, in swimming competitions, in which, however the two swimmers were not competing who finishes the distance to be swum faster, but in keeping each other underwater. The winner was the one how could hold his breath underwater longer.¹¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, diving is also a common motif, especially when trying to find treasure, weapons or other valuables hidden at the bottom of lakes.¹¹⁵⁰ Örvar Oddr himself had a reputation for being an excellent swimmer, and he beat other attendants in a diving competition at the court of King Herraud of Hunland.¹¹⁵¹ If the name Zotmund is indeed Scandinavian, it is understandable why the Hungarians defending the fort chose the “viking”, possibly a skilled swimmer, to carry out the hole drilling. The wording of the chronicle, that the Hungarians ‘found’ (*invenerunt*) a person skilled in diving, suggests that this skill was not widespread in their own circles and might have been worth entrusting the task to an expert.

Final remarks

¹¹⁴⁶ Veszprémy, “Korhúség és forrásérték”, 811.

¹¹⁴⁷ Susan Rose, *Medieval Naval Warfare 1000–1500* (London: Routledge, 2002), 123; Felipe Fernández-Armesto, “Naval Warfare after the Viking Age, c. 1100–1500”, in *Medieval Warfare. A History*, ed. Maurice Keen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 238.

¹¹⁴⁸ Frank J. Frost, “Scyllias: Diving in Antiquity”, *Greece and Rome* 15, no. 2 (1968): 180–5.

¹¹⁴⁹ Remigiusz Gogosz, “*Hver er sterkastr?*” *The Sports and Games of the Northmen in the Middle Ages*, PhD dissertation (Rzeszów: University of Rzeszów, 2016), 97–112.

¹¹⁵⁰ E.g. Carl Christian Rafn (ed.), “Ásmundar saga kappabana”, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*. Vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Copenhagen: Hæðvig Fríðrek Popp., 1829), 472–3; the practice is also known from Beowulf: Frederick Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1922), 55–8 (Ch. 22).

¹¹⁵¹ Boer, *Örvar-Odds saga*, 154–5.

Both chronicles and Old Icelandic sagas are constructed from different narrative layers deriving from different periods. The recorded events pass through a series of filters before the stories, maintained by oral tradition, eyewitnesses or contemporary accounts, become known to the audience of the chronicle or saga. During the process, the original story is distorted, shortened or lengthened, its details are changed and mixed up. Each interfering scribe modifies the stories to suit their own taste, language and vocabulary, as well as their political or ideological message. This is well illustrated by the two fourteenth-century texts presented above. The story of Zotmund, for example, was enriched with minor details by the renaissance author Antonio Bonfini,¹¹⁵² until it finally became the famous Hungarian poet's, Mihály Vörösmarty's hero named *Búvár Kund* (Diver Kund) and even got included in modern novels.¹¹⁵³ The story of Örvar Oddr underwent a similar evolution already in the Middle Ages, where not only new details were added to the figure of the legendary hero (the Oleg story, for example), but less important parts were also filtered out (Oddr's stay in Hungary). It can also alter the story considerably if authors from different cultural backgrounds and who live geographically far from the place where the story is set write about a given topic, inadvertently adapting their knowledge to their own linguistic environment. This is how the kings of Hungary were given Scandinavian names in an Icelandic saga, and how Scandinavian names were recorded in a distorted form in a Latin-language Hungarian chronicle. Therefore, it is difficult to establish the origin and, above all, the historical authenticity of a story line over a long period of time. Although the Hungarian episode of the *Örvar Odds saga* clearly reports on the central theme under scrutiny, namely the presence of Scandinavian warriors in Hungary, we cannot determine whether the scene undoubtedly comes from Scandinavian oral tradition. In contrast, in the case of the chronicle composition, the eleventh-century text presumably testifies to viking warriors in Hungary, except that this time it is the text itself that does not state this explicitly. While in one case we are supposed to hypothetically determine the chronology of the episode, in the other case the same applies to the interpretation of the names in the text.

What we can say with certainty is merely that in fourteenth-century Iceland it was considered conceivable that Scandinavian warriors served in Hungary during the Viking Age, and it was also not unbelievable in fourteenth-century Hungary that foreign (Scandinavian?) warriors served here in the eleventh century. Most historians who take a very critical approach towards the historical authenticity of medieval texts would favour this interpretation. The other possibility is to rely on our background knowledge (Andrew's Rus' connections, the geographical knowledge of Icelandic saga editors about

¹¹⁵² According to Bonfini, Zotmund used a small drill to go under water and slowly make holes into the German ships. He was occupied with his task during the whole night, barely having time to swim back to his comrades with the arrival of dawn. Ioan Sambucus (ed.), *Antonii Bonfini Rerum Ungaricarum Decades* (Frankfurt: Andreas Welchelus, 1581), 199.

¹¹⁵³ Mihály Vörösmarty, "Búvár Kund", in *Vörösmarty Mihály összes költeményei*, ed. Károly Horváth (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2006), 177–9.

Eastern Europe) and the structure of the texts (the transmission of the Oleg story, the “authenticity” of chapter 89 of the chronicle) to at least partially trust the information. Accordingly, we do not necessarily have to regard certain similarities of events as coincidence: the reign of the two kings, the civil war period, the fact that Odd joined the service of the king who had been forced to flee during his exile abroad, that the victorious king (Andrew I?) converted the country to Christianity, or that both Zotmund and Örvar Oddr were excellent swimmers and divers. Complete agreement is hardly to be expected, since later layers may have been added to the historical basis (for example, the events of the struggle for the throne during the reign of King Coloman). In this case, we can propose that the news of the service of Varangian warriors like Zotmund and Vylungard in Hungary reached the north as well. The tradition continued to develop in different forms, until its reminiscences – after changes in content – became readable in two very different forms in fourteenth-century Hungary and Iceland alike.

Chapter 9

Conclusions

“Harald was the son of the king of Varangia [...] he wanted to come and show reverence to the most blessed emperor Lord Michael the Paphlagonian [...] He also brought with him a following of five hundred noblemen. After the death of the lord Michael [...] Harald wished to return to his homeland and made this entreaty before Monomachos. He was not allowed but...nonetheless, he secretly escaped.”¹¹⁵⁴
(Kekaumenos: *Strategikon*, c. 1075–8)

“Ragnvaldr had the runes cut; [He] was in Greece, was the leader of the *lið*.”¹¹⁵⁵
(Runestone U 122 B-side, c. 1050)

“Thus Haakon came over with his Varangian followers. He allied himself with Yaroslav [...] Now when Yaroslav saw that he was overpowered, he fled from the field with Haakon, the Varangian prince [...] Yaroslav arrived safely at Novgorod, but Haakon departed beyond the sea.”¹¹⁵⁶
(PVL, early twelfth century)

“King Eymund had a word with King Jarisleif [...] ‘We need money – replied Eymund – and my men want more than food for their service. We’d rather go to another country and seek our fortune there.’”¹¹⁵⁷
(Eymundar þáttir Hringssonar, fourteenth century)

In the beginning of the *Introduction* (Chapter 1), the opening quotes illustrated outside perspectives on the Viking Age warrior society, called Rus’ in its heyday; the ninth and tenth centuries. It was not a static society, however, and its dynamics are captured even in the words of those, who were not part of and did not fully understand this world. Despite the marked cultural and social transformation slowly on the way from the late ninth century on account of contact with various people in the East, the Rus’ were still perceived in the tenth century as groups of warrior societies *within* the orbit of literate Byzantine and Islamic elites. In other words, they were recognizable, (relatively) familiar, and seen as belonging together, despite a recognition of their division into smaller enclaves in the forested regions of the Eastern Slavic territories. They were distant neighbours, but part of the region, and contemporaries knew them as slavers and merchants who could quickly turn to be fierce foes to acquire what they needed most: luxuries. Although they rarely managed to threaten the very core or existence of either the steppe, Greek or Islamic societies, they were swift in organizing large armies and their mobility on the rivers allowed them to reach vulnerable targets unexpectedly. For

¹¹⁵⁴ Kekaumenos. n. d. *Strategikon*. Online source: <http://www.acad.carleton.edu/curricular/mars/kekaumenos.pdf> [accessed: 05. 12. 2023.] 6–7; original: *Cecaumeni Strategicon et incerti scriptoris De officiis regis libellus*. Szerk. B. Wassiliewsky – V. Jernstedt. Petropoli: Typis Academiae Caesariae Scientiarum, 1896. 97.

¹¹⁵⁵ trans. mine; original: Elias Wessén and Sven B. F. Jansson (ed.), *Sveriges runinskrifter. Vol. 6. Upplands runinskrifter*, Vol. 1 (Stockholm: Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1940), 157–64.

¹¹⁵⁶ RPC 135; original: PVL 65.

¹¹⁵⁷ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans.), *Vikings in Russia. Yngvar’s saga and Eymund’s saga* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), 79; original: *Eymundar þáttir Hringssonar*, 126.

neighbouring political formations (most of them states), it was more advantageous to be on good terms with these gangster groups of sometimes considerable size, and neutralize their aggression with gifts and trade prerogatives, or hire them outright for military stipend and put their martial skills to better use against other foes or internal oppositions – familiar strategies employed against Scandinavian groups in the Western part of the Continent as well.¹¹⁵⁸ When alliances against foreign powers was not a necessity, the Rus' remained gangsters amongst each other; rival leaders mustered their followings bound to them by oaths, gifts and the promise of booty or tributes, and independent retinues maneuvered the region in the service of (to borrow Cat Jarman's catchy phrase) so-called 'river kings' in a power game.

From the eleventh century onwards, a marked difference stands out in the written records concerning 'eastern viking' groups, and this time it is well paralleled by written sources of internal nature, both contemporary and later. I am talking about the '(real) arrival of the Varangians', which has been noted by several leading researchers as a new epoch within the saga of the *Vikings in the East*.¹¹⁵⁹ Since I ended with a chapter on a late and protruding story of the eastern viking phenomenon, I feel obliged to briefly return to this epoch in more general terms. Not because I claim much originality in the interpretation of the matter, but because the 'Varangian question' actually contrasts well with Rus' warriorhood. All sources quoted in the beginning of this conclusive chapter concern events of the early- to mid- eleventh centuries; two of them were produced later, but was based on long upheld oral tradition, and in this case reflect a pattern well-grounded in other contemporary documents. All attest that Scandinavian warrior groups were still active in the East in the eleventh century, mostly in two locales: the Byzantine Empire and the Kievan Rus' principality. Several criteria, however, contrasts in these sources with the former Rus' trajectory.

First of all, the outsiders – Kekaumenos and the later Slavic Kievan chroniclers – label Scandinavian warriors as 'Varangians', and although the cited runestone evidence from Uppland (Sweden) does not employ the term for the runecarver Ragnvaldr, being described as a leader of a retinue (*lið*) in Greece could hardly mean anything else than a commander in the 'Varangian Guard'. Similar to Ragnvaldr, Eymundr and his company – or real historical actors alike him – were likely addressed as 'Varangians' by contemporaries. In the court of Yaroslav the Wise (the saga's Jarisleifr), Varangians were favourably distinguished from the ordinary population of the Kievan Rus' as subsequent laws proclaimed in the mid-eleventh century testify.¹¹⁶⁰ This brings me to my second

¹¹⁵⁸ See for instance: Lund, "Allies of God or Man?"; Coupland, "From poachers to gamekeepers"; Abels, "Household Men, Mercenaries and Vikings".

¹¹⁵⁹ Just to cite a few: Shepard, "The Viking Rus and Byzantium", 509–10; Noonan, "Scandinavians in European Russia", 153–5; Fedir Androshchuk, "Vikingarna – ruserna – varjagera, *Historiska Nyheter*", *Olga & Ingegerd – Vikingafurstinnor i öst* (2004–5): 36–9; Jakobsson, *The Varangians*, 173–4.

¹¹⁶⁰ Vernadsky, *Medieval Russian Laws*, 27–8, 38–9.

point, namely that Varangian warrior groups were outsiders in Rus' society. The process must have started slightly earlier than the eleventh century, before the term Varangian was actually invented. This is mirrored by Vladimir's despatch of his Nordic warriors to Basil II with the famous warning that they acted as harmful outsiders in his realms and wish to see none of them again.¹¹⁶¹ A similar incident happened on the square of Poromon in Novgorod in 1015, where Yaroslav's Varangians were slain by the townfolk to put an end to the disorder they caused with the locals' wives.¹¹⁶²

The reason for this is to be sought in another feature of the cited accounts; these warrior groups came from Scandinavia and most of them also belonged or returned there. This is even obvious in the case of Ragnvaldr, who carved a runestone for himself back in Sweden, and runestones similar to his, specify that peaceful settlement in the homelands was a sought-after scenario at the end of military service in the East.¹¹⁶³ According to the tale-like story of Eymundr, he received the town of Polotsk in Rus' and held it until his death as his own kingdom,¹¹⁶⁴ but this should be treated with some scepticism. He was regarded as an *útlendr*, a 'foreigner', in Rus', even at the end of his day, according to the saga.¹¹⁶⁵ Even if some eastern adventurers stayed abroad, as late medieval Icelandic sagas record, the narratives also speak of eastern military service as a phase in the character's life usually to be ended with return to Scandinavia.¹¹⁶⁶ Why these texts should be viewed with circumspect is commonplace; events set in the tenth-eleventh centuries are described through a late medieval lense and with elements of fantasy. What Icelandic sagas do reflect, however, is that the Varangians are definitely not Rus';¹¹⁶⁷ the latter – despite the intensive Scandinavian flavour of their ninth-tenth-century history – evaded later saga writers' attention.

The difference is not solely that Late Viking-Age Nordic warrior groups mainly arrived directly from Scandinavia where they belonged, and did not settle more permanently in the East in contrast to the culturally hybrid Rus'. They apparently were also few in number. Doubts have been expressed about the size of the notorious 6,000-strong contingent dispatched by Vladimir to Basil II, which later allegedly became the nucleus of the Varangian Guard of Byzantium. Since even later Scandinavian kings were unable to amass such a huge force let alone one that could operate independent of the central power, this number is suspiciously large.¹¹⁶⁸ Unlike the Rus', who were seen as a politically formative force in the region, eleventh-century Scandinavian or Varangian warrior groups posed no

¹¹⁶¹ RPC 93; PVL 37.

¹¹⁶² PVL 62.

¹¹⁶³ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 96, 99–100.

¹¹⁶⁴ *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar*, 133.

¹¹⁶⁵ *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar*, 134.

¹¹⁶⁶ Cf. Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, 193–222.

¹¹⁶⁷ Jakobsson, *The Varangians*, 73–4, 173–4.

¹¹⁶⁸ Roland Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz. Bedingungen und Konsequenzen mittelalterlicher Kulturbeziehungen*, Vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 91–3.

imminent danger for contemporary powers. They formed bands of a few hundred or outmost a thousand apparently – 500, 600, 800, 1000 is mentioned in the sources –, meagre forces to cause real disturbance.¹¹⁶⁹ The story of an individual entrepreneur, a certain Chrysocheir, is much illustrative. Georgios Cedrenus, who somehow gave this possibly Norse warlord (Auðmundr?) a Greek name,¹¹⁷⁰ records that after the death of his kinsman Vladimir the Great, Chrysocheir showed up in front of Constantinople with a force of 800-strong, ostensibly to serve there as a mercenary.¹¹⁷¹ He was not granted allowance in the Greek capital, upon which he furiously turned to plunder the Byzantine countryside, and defeated a coastal fleet at Abydos. He was, however, lured into ambush by the beguile of peace at Samos by David of Orchrid, commander of the island's forces, and Nikephoros Kabasilas, the duke of Thessaloniki. The Byzantine *thema* system kept smaller forces at bay. The situation compares strikingly with larger Rus' expeditions discussed in Chapter 7. Smaller Rus' expeditions, doomed to failure, occurred with former flotillas too, but Chrysocheir's case is set apart from the ninth-tenth-century raids as his primary goal was to be hired as a mercenary with his band.

Chrysocheir's story, in tandem with the four cited sources, illustrates another characteristic of eleventh-century eastern viking activity. These small groups of fortune-seekers came East with their own leaders as the examples of Haraldr, Ragnvaldr, Hákon, Eymundr and probably Chrysocheir also show; the latter becoming active immediately after his patron and possibly employer, Vladimir died. These warbands operated in their own closed units: as their departures from service demonstrate, they were bound to their own leaders and not to the actual employers, whether it be a Rus' *knyaz* or a Greek *basileus*. I believe this extended chain of command was not necessarily present in the early stages of Rus' history. Scandinavian retinues led by their warlords – and labelled as Rus' by contemporaries – carved out a territory for their own in the East during the ninth and tenth centuries. Employers and commanders were the same at the time. The *tabula rasa* situation in the forest belt of European Russia, naturally presented different opportunities to leaders like the legendary Rurik, Oleg and Igor, as well as to their rivals like Askold, Dir, Rogvolod or Tury.

The 'power game' in these competitive, mostly pre-state environments, should not be envisaged as a top-down struggle, where all possible participants yearned for hegemony and the final winner crushed everybody underneath. Naomi Standen visualizes these chains of events as something akin to a 'social dance', where certain actors rather step aside from the middle of the (dance) floor to avoid confrontation with more powerful candidates. These secondary (or middle) leaders should not be seen

¹¹⁶⁹ *Cecaumeni Strategicon*, 97; Immanuel Bekker (ed.), *Georgius Cedrenus*, Vol. 2, CSBH, no. 2 (Bonn: Weber, 1839), 478–9; *Eymundar þáttir Hringssonar*, 122; Raymond C. Beazley (intr.), Robert Mitchell and Nevill Forbes (trans.), A. A. Shakmatov (compr.), *The Chronicle of Novgorod 1016–1471*. Camden Third Series, no. 25 (London: Offices of the Society, 1914), 1; PVL 62, 67.

¹¹⁷⁰ For discussion on the origins of the name, see: Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, 50.

¹¹⁷¹ Georgius Cedrenus, 478–9.

as less successful than those who gained supreme power. They only made a sensible decision to remain on the dance floor as leaders of their own followings. Unbridled competition for supremacy was a precarious game, and for many, keeping their authority at lower levels was a safer choice.¹¹⁷² Although Standen's examples come mostly from Eastern Eurasian history, her model works well to understand the centralization of the Rus' community and the place of Sveneld, Ikmor, Dobrinja, and the ones confirming the Byzantine-Rus' peace treaties, within the process. The power game, however, was mostly over by the eleventh century: a quasi-state, the Kievan Rus' started to crystallize from Vladimir's reign onwards, and outsiders – like the Varangians – neither had a legitimate claim, nor the local support and manpower to enter into competition for the rule of this vast territory.

I see the essential difference between the two types of warrior groups against this political background, and the ethnic question – the Rus' adapting to the environment and becoming locals, whilst the eleventh-century Scandinavians (the Varangians especially) being strangers at best. These two aspects had an effect on the functioning of these warrior groups and on how they were perceived by others. Ninth-tenth-century Rus' warriors were largely 'retainers', whilst the Varangians were 'mercenaries'. This is not purely a question of scholarly semantics. The two institutions can naturally overlap and, at first glance, both seem to work along a similar logic: warriors demanding payments, lodgings and sometimes weapons from their leaders in exchange for loyalty and physical support in political struggles. A retainer, asking to be admitted into the followings of a lord as an individual, is closely bound and vulnerable to his patron and has little ability to maneuver on his own within society. Mercenaries are different since they are hired as a group, at least in the instances above this was definitely the case. They have more room to move in social and political palettes, and therefore, hiring intact, organized groups was more dangerous: loyalty bound their members only to their immediate commander and not to the actual employer, making them less reliable, often even treacherous. Eymundr's constant threats for changing sides on account of a failed raise in their wages, as communicated to Jarisleifr on multiple occasions, was probably a reality, even if the scenes are depicted somewhat comically in his saga. Scandinavian mercenaries under Vladimir also happily defected the grand prince for higher Byzantine pay, and Haraldr *hárðráði* probably felt no remorse either for leaving his father-in-law's service in Kiev. Chrysocheir acted in a similar vein when looked for a new patron upon the passing of the previous. Even after a defeat, these groups could just leave the political scene without further consequences as the case of Hákon, possibly identical with jarl

¹¹⁷² Naomi Standen, "Followers and Leaders in Northeastern Eurasia, ca. Seventh to Tenth Centuries", in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity. Rome, China, Iran and the Steppe, ca. 250–750*, ed. Nicola di Cosmo and Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 400–18.

Hákon Eiríksson of Norway,¹¹⁷³ demonstrate. The Varangian expedition in Georgia in the year 1042 also fits the same pattern.

These mercenary groups functioned as retinues, and thought about themselves as such. It is indicated by designations used for themselves: three eleventh-century Scandinavian runestones (U 122, Sö 338, Vg 184) commemorating individuals taking military service in the East, label warriors as *húskarls*, *drengs*, or parts and even leaders of *liðs*, Old Norse terms closely associated with retinue service.¹¹⁷⁴ From their perspective, however, this retainer service did not extend beyond the leader of the *lið* itself. Individual commanders like the ones mentioned, were not war-lords but mercenary captains, ensuring payments from any employer. Without embeddedness in the local ‘power game’, they remained outsiders and maneuvered on various ‘dance floors’, mostly acting as those ‘secondary leaders’ who were described by Standen as willingly letting more powerful rulers go ahead in line in exchange to keep their own – still significant – influence. It is no coincidence that Haraldr *hárðráði* became the exception from this rule: he was rooted in Norway, but would have had no chance of similar elevation in the East. The saga of Yngvarr, although not to be taken too seriously, tells the story of an overambitious leader, whose expedition failed in the East.

It does not mean that there were no individual players and mercenary gangs among the Rus’ before. However, they had the potential to act together in more co-ordinated and politically significant ways, because they also formed a *society* in the more immediate neighbourhood of contemporary eastern political powers. This is not something we can tell of most eleventh-century ‘eastern vikings’, acting as parts of professional male warrior groups of limited manpower, bound truly only to their own commanders and perceived as strangers in the East – not only foreigners (even among the Rus’), but also as outsiders in the ‘power game’ of larger geopolitics. Also, apart from perhaps being employed occasionally as intact mercenary groups, there were various modes of entry for Rus’ warriors into foreign service as individual hirelings and even forced conscripts. The cultural package acquired by Rus’ warriors in distant lands, whose bits and pieces were transmitted back into their own territories was sometimes also markedly different. The steppe environment and Turkic elites left a significant impression on Rus’ warrior society, a pattern evading the Varangians, who only felt the cultural impact of Byzantium. This provisory survey based on a few selected samples only meant to point out an intrinsic difference: warfare, society and culture was embedded differently in the Rus’ and Varangian periods of eastern viking history.

The Varangian question, however, forms only an end-story in this dissertation. The chapters, I feel like, contributed to, but in no way claim to have solved, two theoretical questions on ‘eastern

¹¹⁷³ Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus’*, 404–17.

¹¹⁷⁴ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 36, 96, 188, 237.

vikingness'; what did it entail to be a warrior in the East in terms of duties, possibilities, and status, and how Rus' warriors should be seen within the wider viking phenomenon. The first issue reflects more on social, the second on cultural aspects of Rus' warriorhood, both intertwined by the theme of warfare. The 'connecting threads' between the various themes should be outlined now and brought together in a theoretical summary.

The ninth-tenth-century Rus' formed a warrior society and engaged in various types of violent encounters in the East. They dotted the eastern landscapes from the Slavic forest belt and the steppes towards Byzantium and the fringes of the Islamic sphere as raiders, slavers, arm dealers, conquerors, retainers, mercenaries and forced conscripts. They entered military service of political formations from the Kievan Rus', through Poland, Volga Bulgharia, Byzantium, Bohemia, Hungary, and Khazaria to as far as the Islamic Emirate of Derbent. It is possible that such a list could even be prolonged or specified, were there more surviving evidence. There is no single perspective through which these diverse modes of engagements can be straightforwardly interpreted, and they are best approached through multiple lenses. The vocabulary of contemporary documents reflects on how Rus' warriors were perceived in the region, which often contrasts with an insider view of the participants themselves or the historical realities brought out by comparisons with warrior groups, other than the Rus'. The discussion in the present work probably makes the picture even more blurred. There is a plethora of modern terms which do not resonate well with all aspects of the historical situation.

Ambiguities arise, for instance, over whether the Rus' should be seen rather as 'merchants' or 'warriors', a distinction somehow still defining their place within the viking phenomenon. Genuinely there were no difference between the two. This is not only because the Rus', much like Scandinavian vikings in the West, could swift between these roles as befitting their needs. From the Rus' perspective one could simply not be a peaceful trader in the East. Waterways leading to the destined markets in Constantinople and the Islamic lands intersected the world of sometimes unpredictable nomads and semi-nomads, Magyars, Pechenegs, Oghuz', Burtas and others, or else the markets themselves were located on the steppes, in Itil and Bulgar for instance. Rus' merchants also had to be afraid of internal competitors and even trading partners. It is a twisted logic to depict the Rus' with the neutral and non-judgemental expression 'trader', when the most important merchandise they were dealing with, namely slaves, were acquired with brute force. Rus' arm-traders stealing, smuggling, buying and selling swords from the fringes of the Slavic to the Islamic worlds were hardly innocent salespersons either. Violence was also a coercive way to struck better deals: expeditions were often launched to extort merchant rights from the Greeks as evinced by the peace treaties drawn with them. Whether the Rus' should be seen as 'warrior-merchants' or rather 'merchant-warriors' – emphasizing one occupation over the other as more important – was unlikely a contemporary issue for them. As

perhaps reflected in the ‘blackmailing story’ of Ibn Miskawayh, these activities intertwined in Rus’ minds. It was, however, an issue for their peers. As seen, the Byzantines insisted on to disarm and segregate them, and limit the periods of their stay within the empire. This was probably the case on the steppe markets too. All saw the Rus’ as essentially warlike, and people to be careful with, even if they arrived to trade.

Other contested definitions are ‘warriors’ and ‘soldiers’. If seen from a modern anthropological point of view, warriors are persons who engage in physical fighting, but are differentiated from ‘soldiers’ in that they fight for personal glory, their mentality is occupied with heroic values and warfare is not their profession in the strictest sense.¹¹⁷⁵ No doubt most Viking Age Scandinavians and Rus’ were warriors rather than soldiers, at least before the development of centralized powers and standing field armies. However, a tendency is conveyed in the sources that in the second half of the tenth century, certain units were commanded more centrally, warriors were perhaps to be trained as field armies to fight in close formation or on horseback in the open field and co-ordinate their campaigns on land and sea. Some late tenth-century retinues, like probably that of *knyaz* Vladimir, were more standardly equipped with weapons supplied by rulers in contrast to the gift exchange economy of former patron-client systems where weapons were occasional (and optional) extraordinary rewards befitting retainers otherwise supplying their own weaponry. Scandinavian and Rus’ units stationed in developed states, such as in Byzantium or the Caliphates, also had to follow command, and served as parts of regulated armies or alongside local corps. One would also wonder how far forcefully conscripted ‘warriors’, as perhaps those in mid-tenth-century Khazaria, were concerned with personal glory or tasked with anything else than fighting for their masters.

How the Rus’ and contemporary outsiders viewed the status of warrior groups could have differed. Muslim intellectuals transferred their own vocabulary and perspectives of Islamic military structures on the ‘foreign’ Rus’, seeing warriors taking service as essentially servants. Whether called *ghilmān* or *‘abīd*, the perceived slave status of warrior groups stemmed from the writers’ familiarity with the Islamic system of Turkic slave soldiery. It is hard to decide whether there is an element of historical reality in these Arabic designations when applied to the Rus’. Scandinavian and Rus’ warriors were often defeated and taken prisoner in the East as illustrated in a wide range of sources. They suffered a variety of fates, from execution, release, maiming and manual fieldwork to conscription into hostile armies. Warriors falling into the latter category started off as rootless outsiders in the host environment and were most likely considered unfree. However, in many positions of free category in their home society, warriors might have endured worse conditions in terms of the extremities of

¹¹⁷⁵ Andrew Sanders, “Anthropology of Warriors”, in *Encyclopedia of violence, peace, & conflict*, ed. Lester Kurtz (San Diego: Academic Press, 2008), 2433.

expected service, social handling or even payment. Rus' warriors are described as afraid of 'afterlife duties' which were perceived as humiliating punishments: they had to serve those who defeated or captured them in battle. Other groups, however, had to follow their own masters to the otherworld 'willingly' as retainers of an unnamed Volga Rus' king. Serious in-group devotion and strict obligation, therefore contrasts with the status of Rus' warriors of corroborated slave status in other locales. Rus' within captor societies might have perceived their role as mercenaries or retainers rather than slaves of either the Khazars or the emir of Derbent. As exemplified above with the Varangian question, the notion of being a 'mercenary' did not necessarily exist in Viking Age Scandinavia and probably neither in Rus'. Since mercenaries were essentially intact retinues hired as groups, it did not make a moral difference to change sides between employers. Allegiance was easily transferred when no personal bonds were active. Warriors taken captive could easily felt to be 'socially dead', however, fair handling of conscripted soldiers in the host societies was not without precedent, and even slaves or outsiders could reach high political positions and exert influence there; one is reminded of the *ghilmān* in the Caliphates' history or the Khwarazmian commanders of the Khazar Khaganate. Personal bonds might have developed with the new masters even if we do not know how a formal 'slave' status might have altered the warriors' feelings. Thus, armed men of near-servile status possibly floated between free and unfree, factors variously dependent on the cultural background of the observers and the fluid conditions of local or Rus' military service.

The other theoretical debate concerns the 'vikingness' of the Rus' phenomenon. I have approached this through the socio-cultural setup of Rus' warrior elites and a military historical comparison with western viking warfare. That there are multiple sources, which specify a Scandinavian involvement in Rus' undertakings and society, is common knowledge by now. It is equally evident that similar social structures existed in both territories, and that the Rus' engaged in 'viking-like' activities as warrior-merchants. I hope this dissertation brought out a few features which tincture this picture.

The Rus' were probably involved in a cross-cultural trading system of the Viking world as fuellers of Carolingian swords already in the ninth century. It was mainly the Islamic world which found fascination with swords produced in Carolingian Frankia or in Scandinavia, which were transmitted by vikings to the East. However, as Islamic terminologies related to swords suggest, the Rus' were also familiar with Islamic blades. It is only the Islamic sources, which address Rus' sword trade, but there is a concurrent silence in them concerning the Rus' selling of swords in the mid-tenth century. Later, however, fragmented reports on the rise of sword trade all seem to point to the 980s. I have proposed that with a perfection of methods, specialized Rus' workshops emerged in the 980s, an otherwise curious time in the history of the eastern Viking Age, as Islamic silver dirhems started to dry up at exactly the same time. Sword production on a larger-scale in Rus' territory also concurred with *knyaz* Vladimir's aspirations to centralization, and might have reflected the prince's attitude of

substituting the lost income of silver, previously acquired mostly with furs and slaves. Swords probably also came handy in equipping larger retinues. That the experiment of the late tenth century proved successful is illustrated by the subsequent circulation of Rus' swords as far as Ghaznavid Afghanistan in the first half of the eleventh century, as well as by the great renown Rus' swords earned and, as reflected in later writings, also maintained even in later centuries within the Islamic world.

Another point of stricter comparison was executed in case of warfare and violence. Both were endemic in the Viking Age East, and was so even in the late phase of the period: numerous eleventh-century runic inscriptions commemorate men who fell in *Garðar* (Rus'), *Grikkland* (Byzantium), or *Serkland* (the lands of Islam) in the East.¹¹⁷⁶ Viking activity – raids, campaigns, mercenary service and seeking conquest – was in no way less significant in the East than in the western Viking world. Small-scale raids, pinned down by western monks regularly in entries in the given years of contemporary *Annales*, were rarely recorded about the Rus' or eastern Scandinavian vikings, but this has more to do with the genres of Byzantine chronicle and Islamic geographical writing rather than with historical realities. Exploitation through violent slave-taking missions was a regularity in the Slavic forest belt. Major campaigns were noted by contemporaries, but these also seem to be few in number, the reason probably to be sought in the expeditions' failure. Even though disbelief in the factuality of army numbers will not permit a systematic comparison, Rus' armies were probably superior than those in the West, suggested by a variety of factors. Campaigns were preceded by huge logistical preparations, levies from subjugated tribes and the hiring of nomadic allies. However, the opponents threatened, such the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic Caliphates or the steppe nomads, were even tougher in numbers, military technologies or open battle tactics. The situation was further complicated by the nomads: relationship with them always had to be mitigated before a larger operation (commercial or warlike) would have been launched since all routes taken led through the steppes.

In the nature of the activities and goals, I see no difference between Scandinavian vikings in the West, and those in the East. Tactics and strategies were similar too; larger flotillas able to decompose to smaller raiding parties, expeditions trying to carve out lands for permanent settlement, islands used as strategic headquarters, and lucrative territories explored in disguise of merchants or travellers can all be detected in the East. Just like viking hosts in the West, Rus' retinues, let alone larger armies, were ethnically inclusive entities, perhaps even more so on account of their minority compared to the Slavs and others. So, if there was a difference between western and eastern viking activity, it was probably in scale, and actually in favour of the Rus'. Although their superiority in power cannot be

¹¹⁷⁶ Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age*, 58–9, 96, 99, 102–4.

proved beyond a degree, the ability to challenge the powerful adversaries in the region, Byzantium, the Caliphates and the Turkic steppe polities is not a negligible factor.

Formidable powers often attracted individuals or smaller groups, as it was more beneficial to join their ranks than to risk one's life in trying to loot them. Just like Scandinavians in the Frankish Empire, for instance, Rus' warriors found service as hirelings – mercenaries, retainers, and probably also as forced conscripts – in various courts of the East as said above. During service, contacts were established with a great variety of people in these locales, who had a tangible cultural impact on Rus' warrior society. It is not only these expats, stationed in these locales, who got affected: news travelled through migrating retainers leaving court services and returning home to Rus' or eastern Scandinavia. Aside from the fascination with the luxurious Byzantine orthodox milieu, and a gradual acquaintance with eastern Christianity, in many of these locales (and Byzantium is no exception) steppe warriors of Turkic cultural backgrounds were also present. I have proposed that the previously mentioned joint campaigns, and these court services – together with extensive trade contacts – facilitated the development of strong cultural ties between the Rus' and certain Turkic groups. Steppe horsemen had a great effect on Rus' warfare, including strategy, tactics and weaponry. Many of the Rus' adopted fighting styles and equipment from steppe communities and acquired cultural values reflected in mixed style warrior graves of the Kievan Rus'. The impact to some extent also reached eastern Scandinavia where substantial amounts of 'oriental' objects, most notably in Birka, testify of closed contacts with the steppes.

This acculturation model, specific to the eastern viking experience in the Rus' period, had a deeper impact on Rus' society, more precisely on its ruling military elite. This is faintly reflected in the partially reconstructable religious system of the Rus', which, as much as we can see from it through the eyes of Greek and Arabic observers, included customs more reminiscent of the region than their original homelands in Scandinavia. The Rus', as I argued, shared the belief in the afterlife service of retainers either bound to their own lords or their enemies who took them captive. These extreme beliefs prompted some to commit suicide in order to fulfil or avoid such faith in the afterlife. The parallels of these beliefs are found not in Scandinavia, but in Central Asian (mostly steppe) cultures, and were preserved and transmitted by Turkic groups as a common cultural heritage across centuries. It is not illogical to assume that the mentioned beliefs infiltrated Rus' culture through amicable contact with some Turkic groups or the mimicking of powerful Turkic warrior elites. The external appearance of the Rus' and eastern Scandinavians in Birka resembled that of the nomads in several elements, including kaftans, baggy-trousers, belt mounts, sabretaches, conical hats and eastern weaponry (sabres, *chekans*, bows and arrows), as evidenced also by textual descriptions and the archaeological material. A strap-mount manufactured according to former steppe models even circulated as far as

Lundur, Iceland.¹¹⁷⁷ Elements of the Rus' ritual world also embody Turkic influence, from the common role of ritual specialists to funerary customs. Charismatic shaman-like figures, temporary tents constructed for the dead, or running of horses to total exhaustion during mourning were all features of the Turkic world. Paired with a ready adaptiveness of Viking Age Scandinavians to foreign customs, beliefs or multiple identities, I feel no strong counter-argument against that there were mental shifts in Rus' identity towards the appropriation of notions of Turkic ruling elites.

In this sense, we come to a point where the notion 'viking' also becomes increasingly blurred in an eastern context but this is not something to be ignored. Were, for instance, Sviatoslav, Chern or the *malik* of the Volga Rus' or his chieftain, 'vikings'? Tyrkir, a possibly Turkic nomad, rowing on board of a viking boat to America around the millennium according to a late medieval Icelandic saga makes an additional spectacular example.¹¹⁷⁸ Or what about Varayazhko and Sviatopolk? I would say they all were 'vikings' to some extent. Biology, language, customs and personal history manifest an exciting interplay in these characters. Born as a Scandinavian by ancestry but leading a nomadic way of life, or born on the steppe and act like a 'viking', Sviatoslav and Tyrkir are two sides of the same coin. The others are somewhere in betwixt. Perhaps they represented the norm, and the two others the exceptions, maybe the opposite. In any case, all were part, and important actors, of the viking diaspora but also took share in the culture of the Turkic world. Their identities, and of those others who are unnamed in the sources, featured a fusion of two (or more) cultural spheres. I called them the *vikings of the steppe*.

Possible avenues for future research are manifold in the mentioned topics. There is a plethora of possible terminology in historical sciences, for instance, which might describe the 'culturally hybrid' Rus' experience within the viking diasporas, including creolization, hybridity, acculturation, assimilation and others.¹¹⁷⁹ Some of these capture parts of the experience, but will not fit others; the involvement of human agency or the unawareness of changing, as well as the variety of responses to cultural (ex)change are worth testing through empirical research in the Rus' case. Future research can hopefully further refine the dichotomy of the viking diaspora as a place of cultural unity and of difference with the involvement of a more systematic use of runic and skaldic material, or further comparisons between the western and eastern Viking world. I have hoped to show that there is potential in using the two together either to supplement or contrast the pertaining data. One such comparison worth exploring perhaps would be the vikings presence in Rus' and Ireland. For first

¹¹⁷⁷ Ingmar Jansson, "Ett rembeslag av orientalisk typ funnet på Island. Vikingatidens orientaliska bälten och deras euroasiska sammanhang", *Tor* 17 (1975–77): 383–421.

¹¹⁷⁸ For discussion, see: Katona, *Vikings of the steppe*, 1–7, 144–5, 161.

¹¹⁷⁹ See, Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

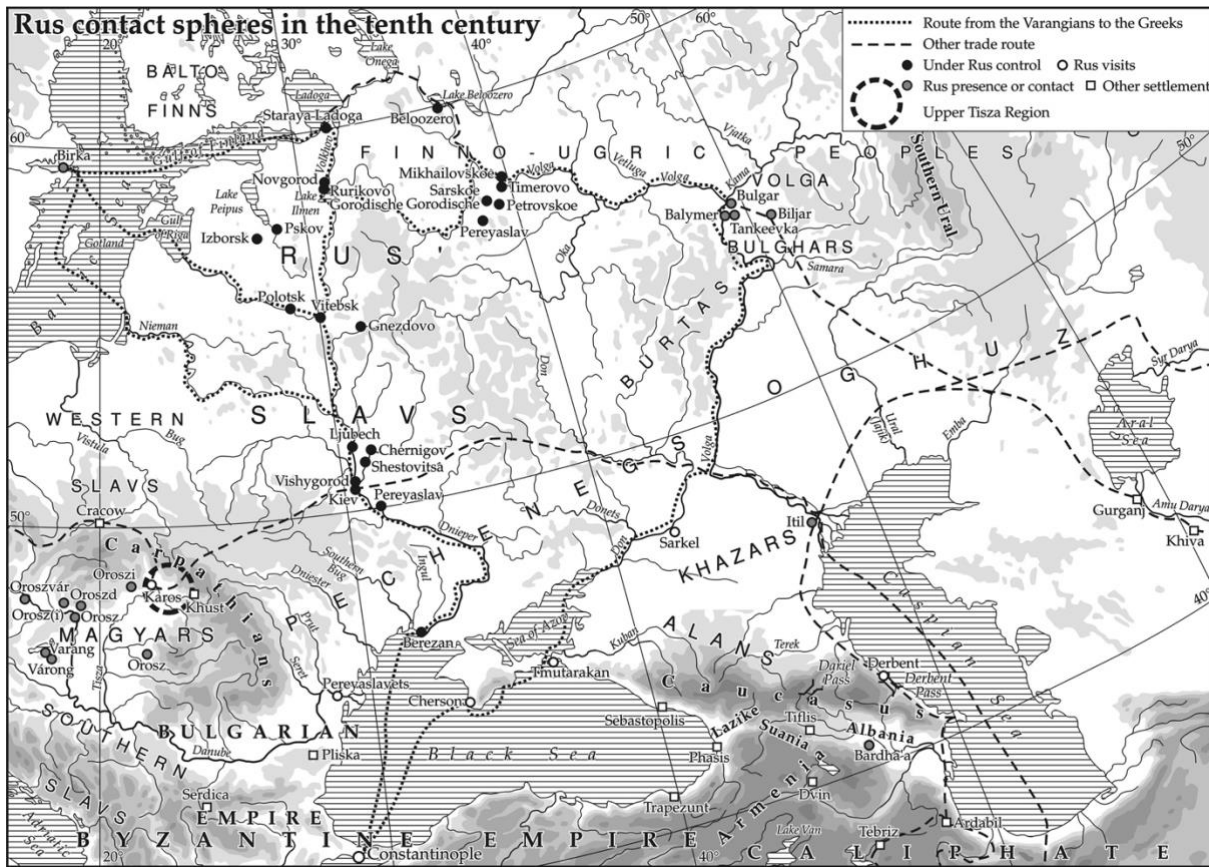
glance these are far-away examples, but both were remote ends of the diasporas, witnessed extensive viking activities, and fusion with, or embeddedness in, the loosely organized local societies.

Further, there are the strictly disciplinary issues; the ever-growing amount of archaeological evidence and rapidly developing natural scientific methods – such as metallographic examinations of Viking Age swords – are promising, although the recent drama of political events fortunately considerably hinder co-operation in this field. Although we tend to think that it is only the material remains which are inexhaustible, there is always potential in the Rus' or 'eastern viking' case – despite a dearth of written sources – for textologists and historians. Icelandic sagas will never go out of fashion, despite all efforts to the contrary to use them as historical sources for the Viking Age, and there are themes worth pursuing through them in case of warrior groups, such as the deflection of retainers to other lords, the gifting of fighting men and units to other rulers, or the social status of warrior groups in contrast to each other. I have closed this dissertation with a hitherto unnoticed scenario present in well-known written sources, and concluded that vikings served also in Hungary during the Late Viking Age, probably in the retinue of the Hungarian King Andrew I. Scandinavians might have joined him during his exile in Kiev due to his connections to Yaroslav the Wise, whose daughter Andrew married. The remnants of these events, including the civil wars fought between brothers, might have been preserved in the Hungarian Latin-language *Illuminated Chronicle* recording two names of possibly Nordic origin in Andrew's entourage (Zothmund and Vylungard), as well as perhaps in the medieval legendary saga of Örvar Oddr. None of the sources are very trustworthy in this regard, but the possibility is likely. This example serves as a further widening of the eastern viking phenomenon in time and space. With the uplift of Silk Road studies and approaching the Middle Ages as 'global', newer evidence is to be expected. In terms of more 'global' significance, viking military groups, including those of the Rus', should be contrasted with similar institutions of contemporary (or later) less-centralized communities, Irish clans, Slavic druzhinas or nomadic retinues, and perhaps their development in more centralized polities along the Silk Roads and Christian Europe could be traced to detect change. Thus, warriorhood, and its intertwined nature to warfare, society and culture is a matter not only for the Viking Age, but the early medieval period in general. The present dissertation is a hopefully a small step in this direction.

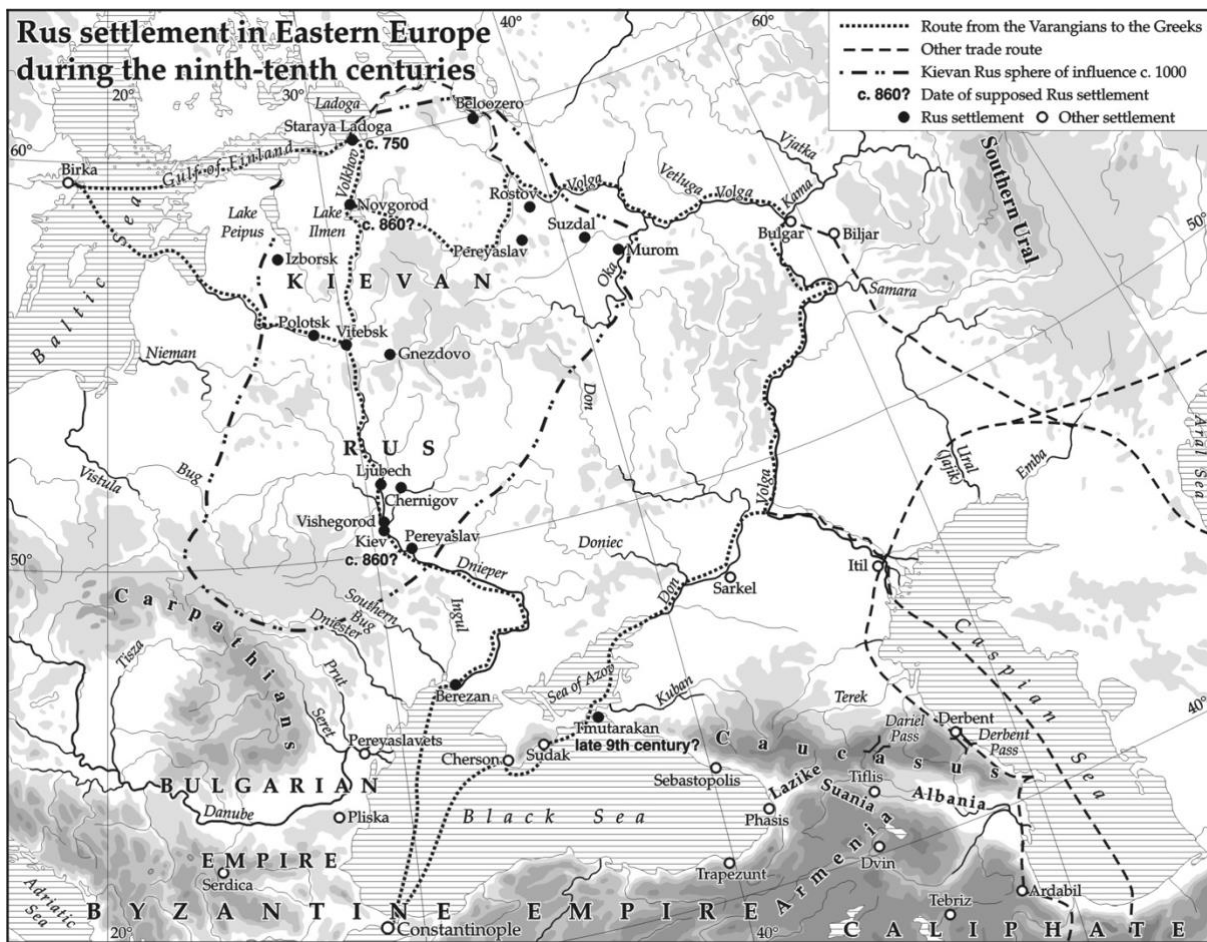
Appendix

Maps

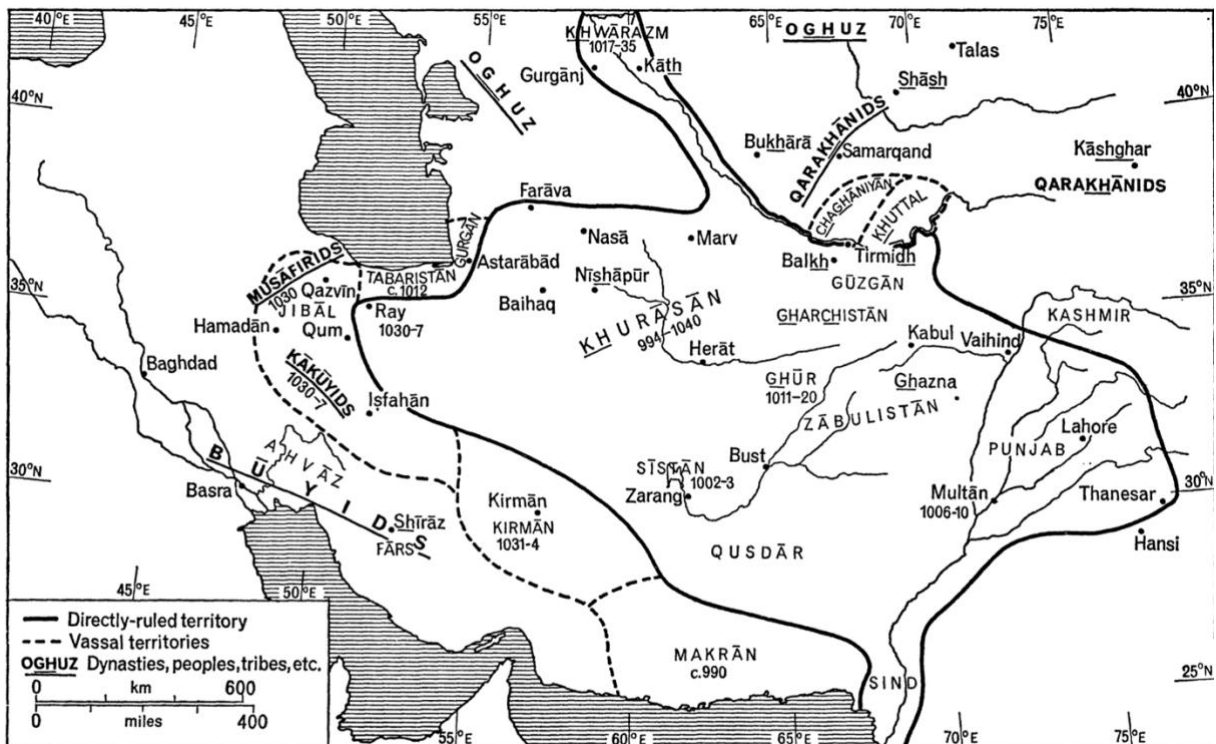
Map 1. Rus' contact spheres in the tenth century (by Béla Nagy)



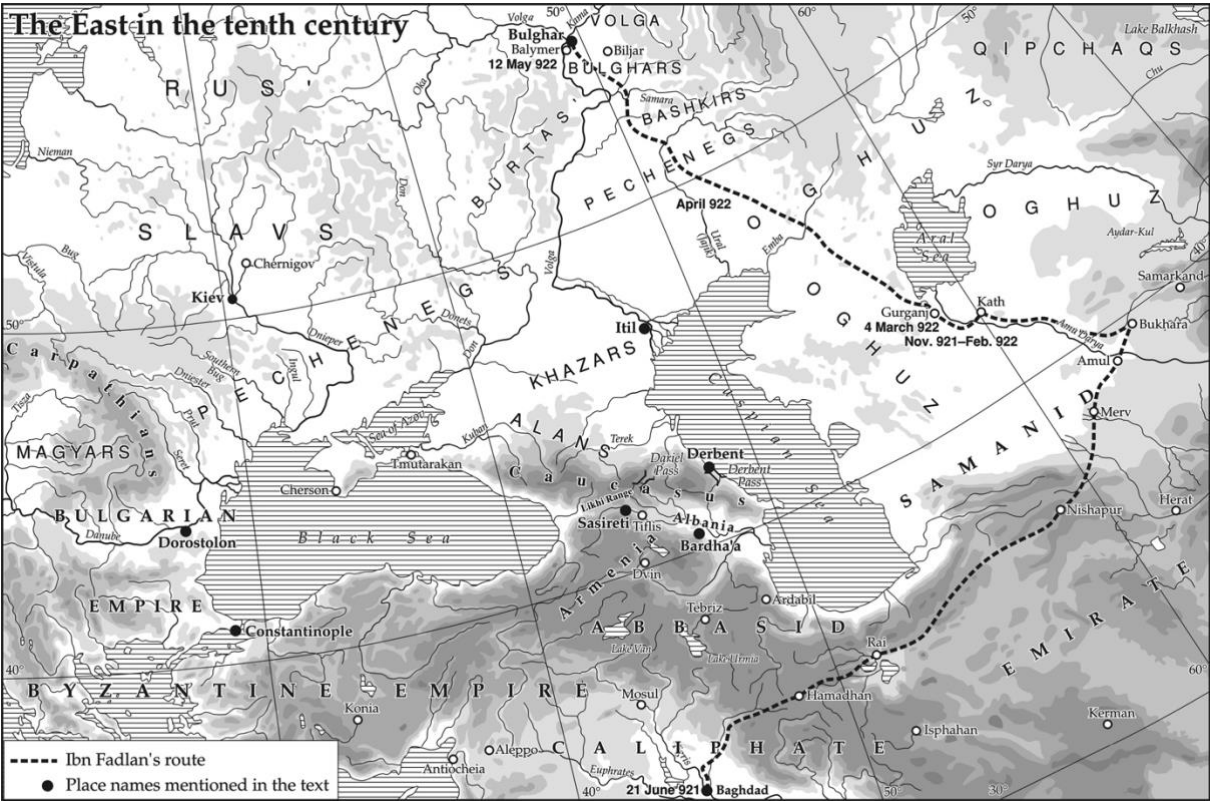
Map 2. Rus' settlement in Eastern Europe (by Béla Nagy)



Map 3. The early Ghaznavid Empire (taken from Bosworth, “The Early Ghaznavids”, 167.)



Map 4. The East in the Age of Ibn Faḍlān (by Béla Nagy)



Figures

Fig. 1. Cremated pile of weapons from the Black Grave in Chernigov (taken from Samokvasov, *Mogil'nyye drevnosti*, 20. Fig. 23.)



Fig. 2. The Chernigov drinking horns from the Black Grave embellished with steppe motifs (By courtesy of Oleksiy Komar)



Fig. 3. Figure of Þórr (?) influenced by Iranian-steppe models from the Black Grave of Chernigov after cleaning (taken from Murasheva and Orfinskaya, "Tenth-century "idol" from Chorna Mohyla", 134. Fig. 3.)



Fig. 4. Double-edged swords from Hungary: Szob-Kiserdő and Vác-Csörög. Stray finds (redrawn after Fodor et al. (ed.), *The Ancient Hungarians*, 410. Fig. 1.; a courtesy picture from Tragor Ignác Museum)



Fig. 5. Socket of a viking spear from the Danube, Budapest (Hungary). Ringerike style (by courtesy of the Déri Museum)



Fig. 6. The tamga of Prince Sviatopolk on a fitting from a warrior grave in Bodzia (taken from Duczko, "Status and Magic", 216. Fig. 10.15.)

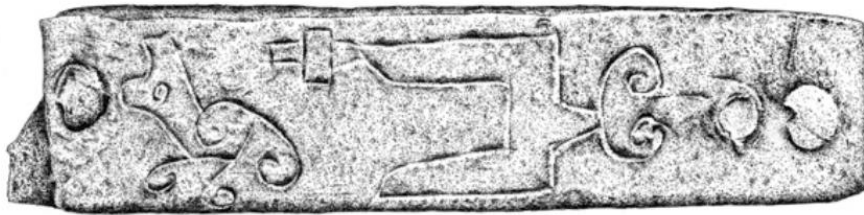


Fig. 7. Nomadic axe from Kazan embellished in the Scandinavian Ringerike style and a scene of Völsunga saga (taken from Abrams, "Connections and exchange", 41. Fig. 2.1.)



Fig. 8. Viking burial with steppe affiliation from Röstä (Sweden) (taken from Müller-Wille, "Zwei Grabfunde", 196. Abb. 2.)

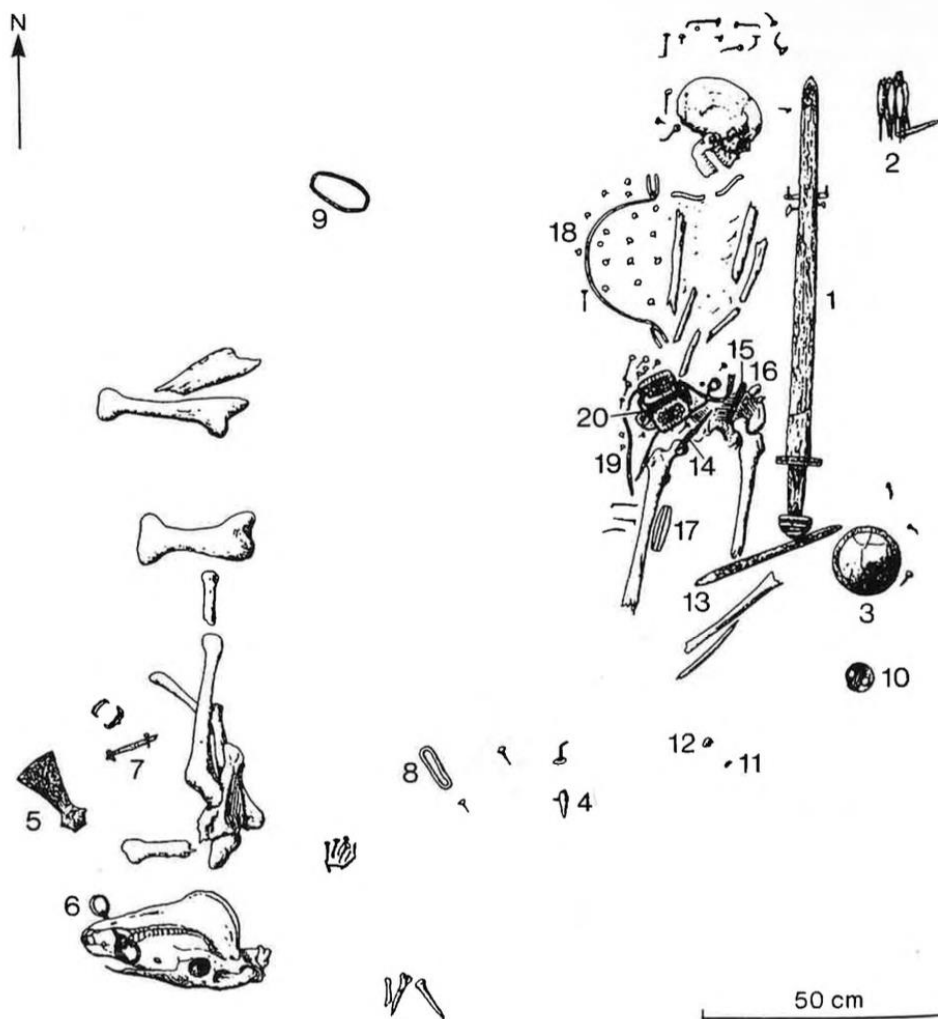


Fig. 9. Magyar style-objects from Grave 108, Golden Gate, Kiev (by the kind permission of Oleksiy Komar)

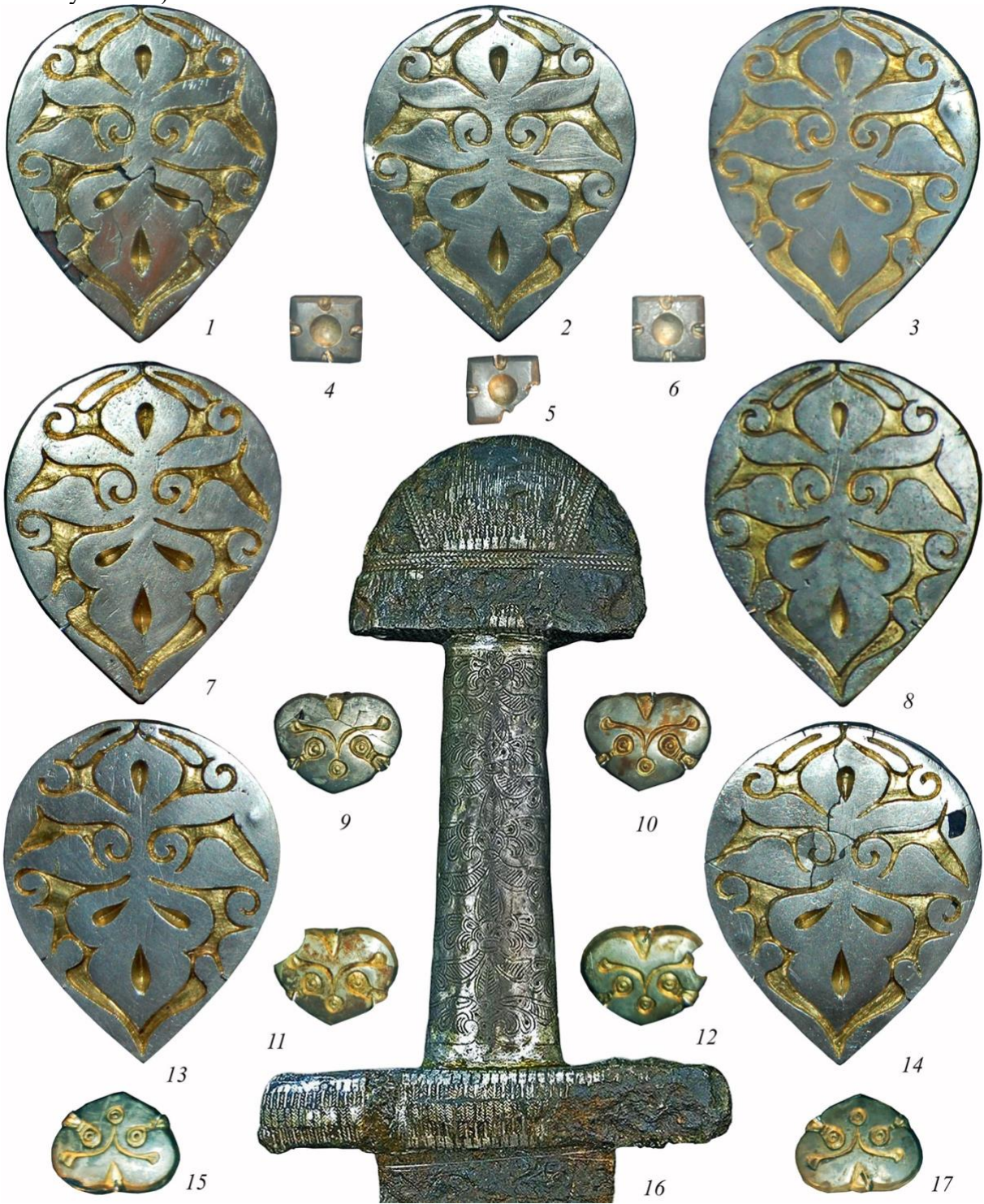


Fig. 10. The so-called Khoinovsky sabre from Kiev and the famous Charlemagne sabre, both showing Nordic influence in decoration (redrawn after Zhuravlev and Murasheva (eds.), *Mech i zlatnik*. 97. Fig. 248.; and Fodor et al. (ed.), *The Ancient Hungarians*, 67. Fig. 1.)

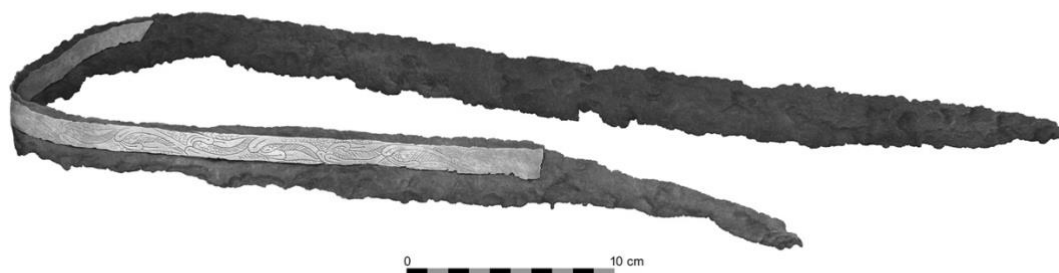


Fig. 11. Conical hats and hat tops from Birka, Shestovitsa and Jászberény (Hungary) (redrawn after Fodor, “Honfoglalás kori temető”, 250–51. Fig. 13 and 16.; and by courtesy of Attila Türk)



Fig. 12. The lost Hunnestad DR 282 runestone with a man depicted with a Danish axe and a conical hat. Drawing of Ole Worm (Wikipedia commons: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/Hunnestadsmonumentet_skåne_ole_worm.jpg Accessed: 03. 09. 2023)

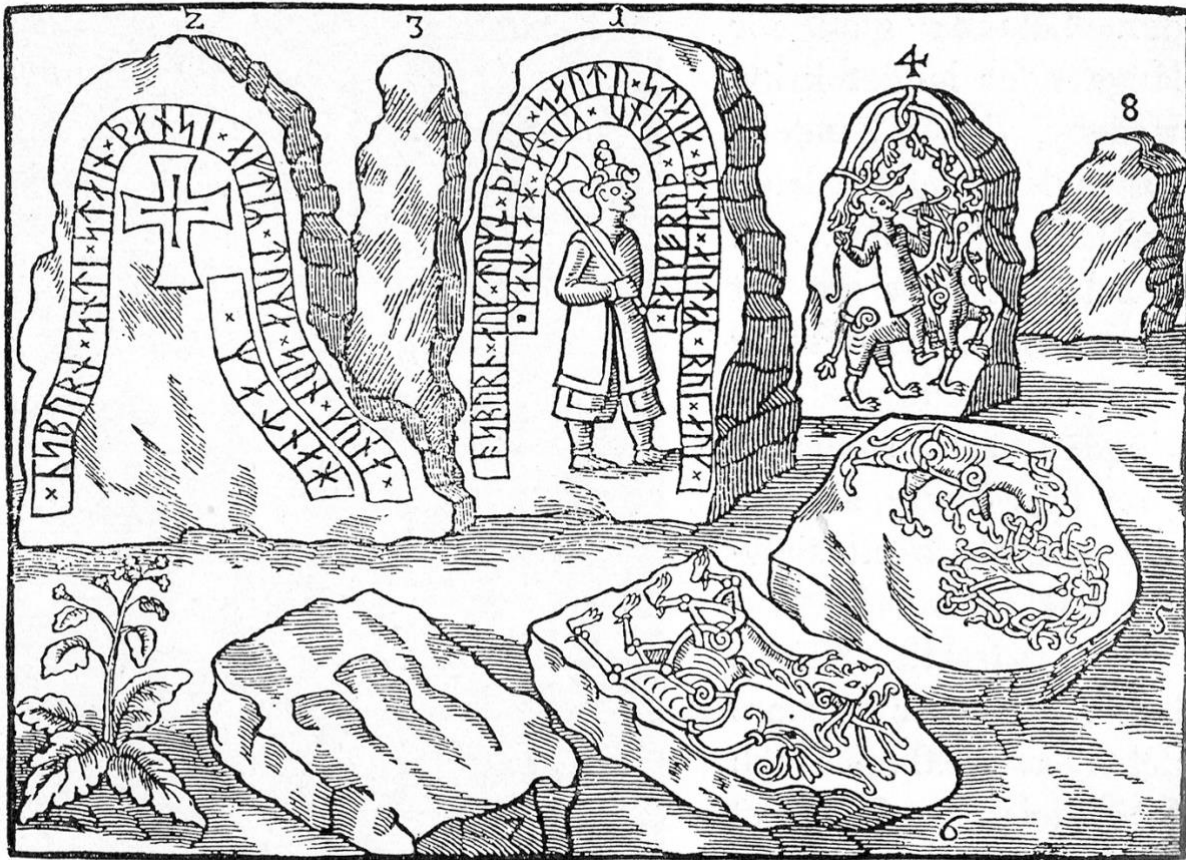


Fig. 13. Scythian elite burial from Arzhan (Tuva region, Russia) (Kurgan 1) with sacrificed retainers and horses (taken from Cunliffe, *By steppe, desert and ocean*, 191. Fig. 5.23.)

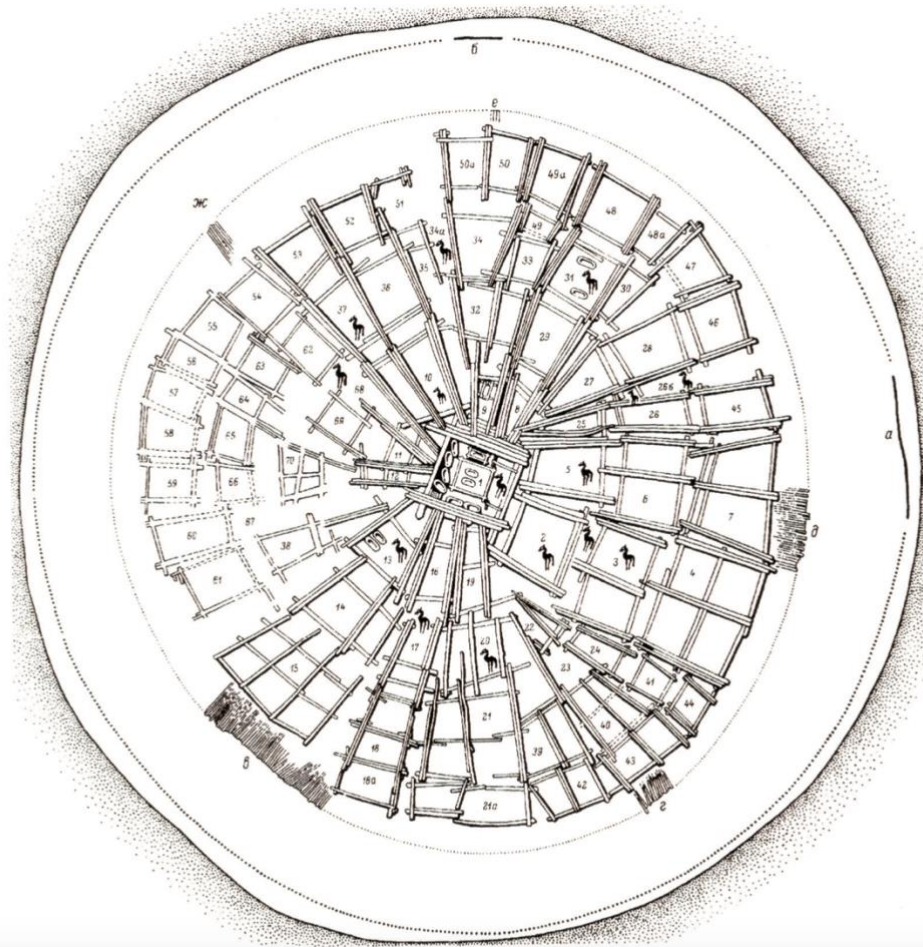


Fig. 14. Tripartite chamber grave from Hedeby (taken from Wamers, "König im Grenzland", 5. Abb. 4.).

Chamber grave 'A' on the left (with presumably the body of the 'king'). Chamber grave 'B' on the middle with presumably two bodies (the retainers).

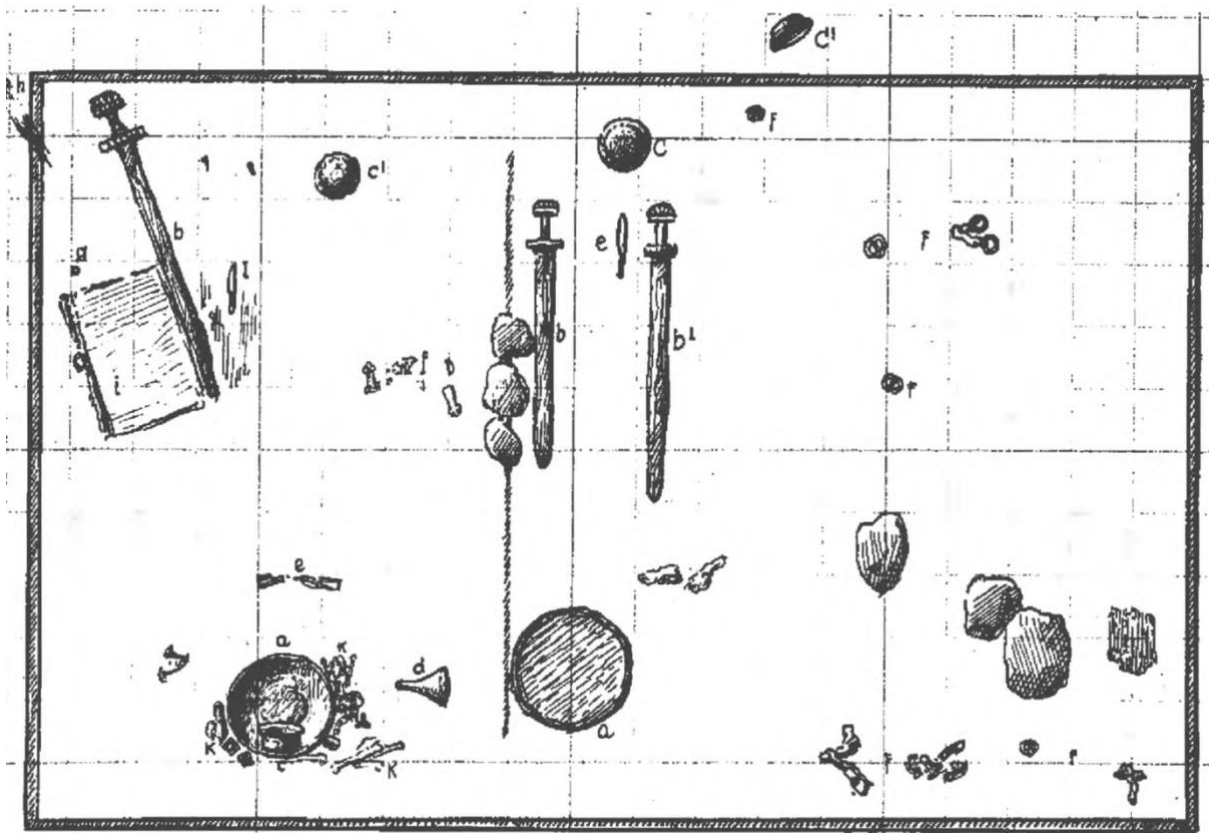


Fig. 15. Weaponry from Gjermundbu (taken from Grieg, *Gjermundbufunnet*, Pl. IV.)

1. Sword, 2. Sword chape, 3. Arrows, 4. Mail fragment, 5–6. Axeheads, 7. shield bosses, 8. Nose and eyeguard of a helmet, 9–10. spears

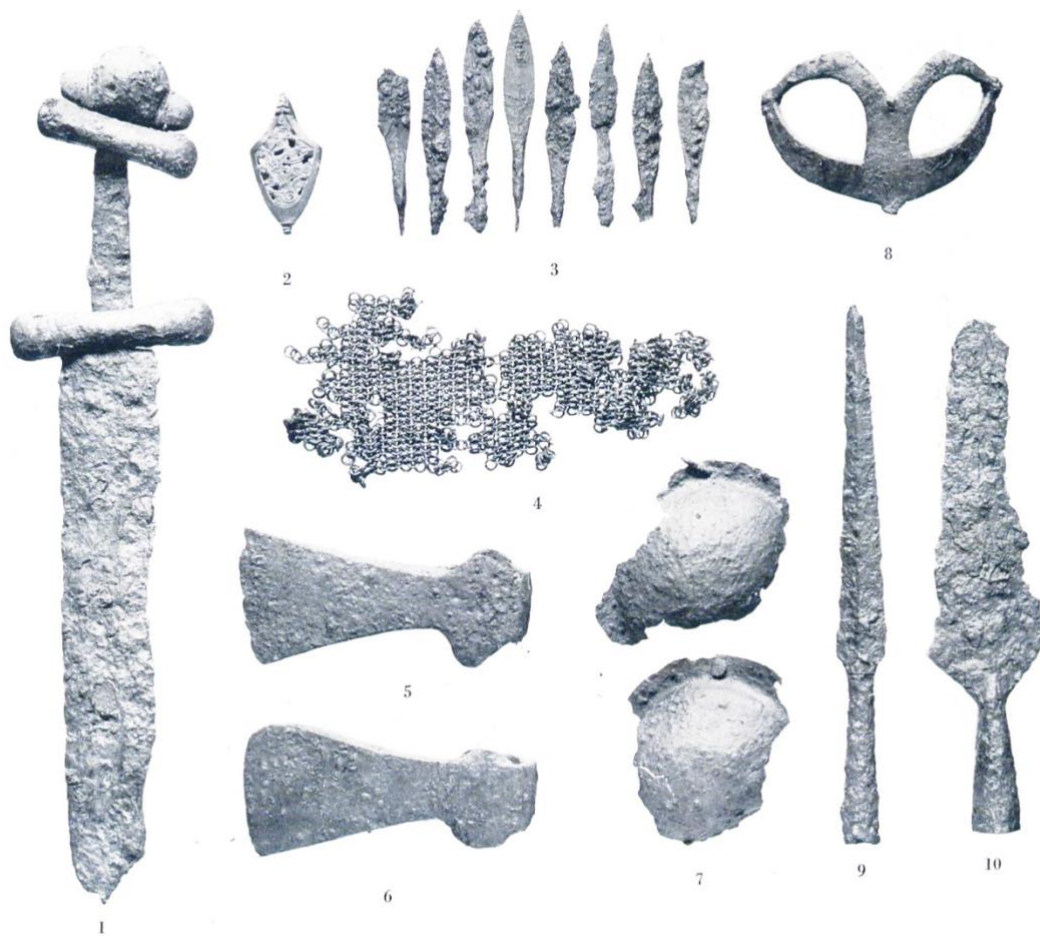


Fig. 16. Artistic depiction of the sinking of Henry III's fleets as at Pozsony (today's Bratislava in Slovakia) on p. 61 in the *Chronicon Pictum* (source: https://web.archive.org/web/20120304111134/http://konyv-e.hu/pdf/Chronica_Picta.pdf)
The last word in the text is the name Zothmund in abbreviated form.



Fig. 17. The name Vylungard on p. 62 in the *Chronicon Pictum* (source: https://web.archive.org/web/20120304111134/http://konyv-e.hu/pdf/Chronica_Picta.pdf)

Multa enim milites erat ipo
son s; precipui erant inter eos
moyses endre vylungard. vito
sa et martinus qui cotidie cū
teutonibus dimicabant acriter.

Tables

Table 1. Sources addressing Rus' products. 'Time' indicates the date of the relevant passages.

Author	Time	Sword trade	Products sold
Ibn Khurradādhbih	c. 830–885	+	furs and swords
Ibn Rusta (Jayhānī/'Anonymous Relation')	903–913 (c. 870– 880)	-	furs and slaves
Ibn Faḍlān	922	-	furs and slaves
al-Iṣṭakhrī (Balkhī)	951 (c. 920)	-	furs and lead/tin
Ibn Ḥawqal	c. 969–979	-	furs, mercury, lead/tin, (slaves)
Ḥudūd al-'Ālam	982/983	+	furs and swords
Muqaddasī	c. 980–985	+	furs, swords, slaves and many others
Miskawayh	982	+	swords

Table 2. Recorded Rus' raids and major campaigns

Any data on the numbers derives from the sources, thus not being my estimate. In cases of counting manpower, the table takes a minimalist approach based on records of casualties suffered by the Rus'. Dates, when unsecure, are given according to the most accepted scholarly view. As becomes apparent in the discussion not all incidents might be authentic. Characterization of the scale of the attacks is based on my overall impression taking into account one or several of the following factors: the aims of the expeditions, the recorded number of ships or men included, the scale of levying of troops, the inclusion of allies, and combined operation on land and sea.

Attack	Time	Scale	Source
Raid on the Crimea (Bravlin)	c. 790	<i>small</i>	Life of St. Stephen of Sougdaia/Surozh, 15–16 th c.
Raid on the Propontis and Paphlagonia	c. 830	<i>small</i>	Life of St. George of Amastris
Raid on Al-Andalus, Seville	844	<i>large</i> (54 or 80 ships, more than 1400 men)	Al-Yacubi Ibn Hayyān
Askold and Dir's assault on Constantinople	860	<i>large</i> (200 ships, or according to Joannēs Diaconus 360 ships)	PVL Brussel's Chronicle Joannēs Diaconus Patriarch Photius Nicetas of Paphlagonia (and other later sources, see: Vasiliev, <i>The Russian attack on Constantinople</i> , 90–113)
Regular raids on the Slavs	from c. 870	<i>small</i> (bands of 300 men according to Gardīzī)	Jayhānī/'Anonymous Relation'
Raid on Abaskun	between 864– 84	<i>small</i>	Ibn Isfandiyār

Oleg's attack on Constantinople	907	<i>large</i> (2,000 ships with crews of forty)	PVL
Raid on Abaskun	911	<i>small</i> (16 ships)	Ibn Isfandiyār
Raid on Daylam and Gilan	912	<i>small</i> (more than 16 ships)	Ibn Isfandiyār
Expedition in the Caspian (Gilan Daylam, Tabaristan, Abaskun and Azerbaijan)	913	<i>large</i> (500 ships with crews of a hundred)	Mas'ūdī
Raid on Al-Andalus	913	<i>large</i> ("thousands of men", 200 ships according to Al-Bakri, but to which raids he refers is uncertain)	Mas'ūdī Al-Bakri (?)
Unspecified number of raids on Al-Andalus	912–961	<i>large</i>	Ibn Ḥawqal
Raid on Al-Andalus with the assistance of Pechenegs (?)	965 (969)	<i>large</i>	Ibn Ḥawqal
Sack of Tmutarakan	941	<i>small</i>	Schechter letter
Igor's first assault on Constantinople	941	<i>large</i> (10,000 ships according to the PVL, "a thousand and more ships" according to Liutprand)	PVL Liutprand of Cremona
Occupation of Bardha'a	943	<i>large</i> (more than 1000 people)	Miskawayh and others
Igor's second assault on Constantinople	944	<i>large</i> ("innumerable ships")	PVL
Sviatoslav's destruction of Khazaria	965	<i>large</i>	PVL Ibn Ḥawqal
Sviatoslav's Balkan campaign	967/8–971	<i>large</i> (min. 10,000 people in his own troops, max. 330,000 with allies)	Leo Diaconus, Joannēs Skylitzēs, PVL
Vladimir's attack on the Volga Bulgars	985	n. s.	PVL
Raid on Masqat (and perhaps Sharvān and Mūqān)	987	<i>small</i> (18 ships)	Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb

Chrysocheir's raid on the Byzantine coastline	1015	<i>small</i> (800 men)	Georgios Cedrenus
Raid in Sharvān	1030	<i>small</i>	Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb
Raid in Sharvān	1032	<i>small</i>	Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb
Rus'–Alan coalition against Sharvān	1033	<i>large</i>	Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb
Yngvarr's expedition	1042	<i>large</i>	Yngvars saga víðförla and Swedish runestones
Yaroslav's campaign against Byzantium	1043	<i>large</i> (more than six thousand people)	PVL

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- DAI = Constantine Porphyrogenitus. *De administrando imperio*. Vol. 1., ed. Gyula Moravcsik, trans. R. J. H. Jenkins. Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967.
- MGH = Monumenta Germaniae Historica
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