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4 Fire-Worshipping Magicians of the North: Muslim Perceptions of Scandinavia and the Norsemen

“I was told that when their chieftains die, the least they do is to cremate him. I was very keen to verify this, when I learned of the death of one of their great men”, reports Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān in his travelogue about his encounter with Scandinavians during his mission to the king of the Volga Bulgars in 922.¹ The event he witnessed made a deep impression on the Arab messenger.² He described the ritual ceremonies preceding the cremation in some detail. Ibn Faḍlān found the enormous consumption of alcohol particularly striking. He claimed: “They are addicted to alcohol, which they drink night and day. Sometimes one of them dies with the cup still in his hand.”³ He reports that even the slave girl who volunteered to accompany her deceased master on his last journey drank copiously during the days preceding the cremation. Moreover, she had intercourse with a number of men, all of whom released her with the words: “Tell your master that I have done this purely out of love for you!”⁴ The girl was not the only gift the chieftain received. A whole ship was prepared to carry the deceased to his gods. Food and drink, weapons, and a couch with cushions of Byzantine silk, where the body could be laid out, were delivered to the ship. Ibn Faḍlān continued:⁵

On the day when he and his slave-girl were to be burned I arrived at the river where his ship was. To my surprise I discovered that it had been beached and that four planks of birch and other types of wood had been placed in such a way to resemble scaffolding. Then the ship was hauled and placed on top of this wood. They advanced, going to and fro around the boat uttering words which I did not understand. [...] Then the deceased’s next of kin approached and took hold of a piece of wood and set fire to it. He walked backwards with the back of his neck to the ship, his face to the people, with the lighted piece of wood in one hand and the other hand on his anus, being completely naked. Then the people came forward with sticks and firewood. Each one carried a stick the end of which he set fire to and threw it on top of the wood. The wood caught fire, and then the ship. [...]. A dreadful wind arose and the flames leapt higher and blazed fiercely.

¹ Montgomery 2000, 12–13.

² Frähn 1976; Frye 2005; Canard 1988; Togan 1966; Hasenfratz 2007, 13–25; Montgomery 2010.

³ Montgomery 2000, 14.

⁴ Montgomery 2000, 17.

⁵ Montgomery 2000, 15–21.

Without a doubt, this lengthy account, of which extracts were incorporated into Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's (c. 1179–1229) famous early thirteenth-century geographic dictionary *Mu'ğam al-buldān*,⁶ contributed to the image of Nordic people in the medieval Islamic world. Drawing upon Arabic sources, my goal is to analyse this image, to elucidate its background, and to present the different perceptions of the North, both factual and fictional.

When comparing the texts, it becomes obvious that Muslim scholars had difficulty settling upon a single, uniform name for the Norsemen. Nordics are referred to as *ar-rūs* – as is the case in Ibn Faḍlān's report – or *as-ṣaqāliba*, but primarily as *al-mağūs* (magicians).⁷ In his article "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rus-ṣiyah", James Montgomery, professor of Classical Arabic at the University of Cambridge, stressed that "among scholars interested in the Vikings, as indeed among scholars generally, it is widely assumed that the *Rūs* were Scandinavians of eastern Swedish origin".⁸ This is not the place to discuss whether the general term *Rūs* encompassed Slavic people. The Arabs, in any case, did not distinguish between two distinct ethnic groups. While the word *as-ṣaqāliba* hints at pagans in a more or less general way, the term *al-mağūs* is closely linked to magic and fire worship. Muslim authors employed this designation first of all for the Zoroastrians, a religious community whose adherents primarily lived – and still live – in central Asia, Persia above all.⁹ Fire plays a central role in their belief system.¹⁰ The early Zoroastrians prayed around fire-places called *ataškada* (eternal flame). Consequently, they were tagged as *fire worshippers*. Just as the Inuit of the Polar region distinguish between different kinds of snow, Zoroastrians distinguish between different kinds of fire. Given that the soil in Persia and northern Afghanistan contains large gas reserves, historians believe that the *eternal flame* was fuelled by a natural gas source.¹¹ These *magicians*, however, were separated from the Norsemen by thousands of kilometres and had very little if anything in common with them. So, why call the Scandinavians *al-mağūs*?

Given the fact that most encounters between Muslims and the Nordic people took place close to the shore of large rivers like the Volga, a name such as *sea people* would seem much more obvious. Yet, Muslim chroniclers, geogra-

6 Wüstenfeld 1965 [1866–1870].

7 Melvinger 1955, 80–81.

8 Montgomery 2000, 2–3.

9 Stausberg 2002–2004; Boyce 2007; Boyce 1996 [1975], Boyce 1996 [1982]; Boyce and Grenet 1991; Dhalla 1994.

10 Wikander 1946; Giara 2002.

11 Kraus 1972, 31 and 331.

phers, and travellers associated the Norsemen with fire rather than water. Although the Arabs certainly knew nothing, or at best a very little, about Nordic religious ideas, they did note the special role that fire played in rituals. Before the Christianization of their realms, this cultic use of fire distinguished the pagan Norsemen from Christians and Jews.¹² As a way to define people who appeared under different conditions in different places – as traders in the Middle East, as plundering pirates along the shores of the Iberian Peninsula, as settlers somewhere in the North – religious practices made more sense than ethnic or geographic origin. Muslim geographers – more on this later – had but a vague idea about Northern Europe and the Nordic homelands.

According to Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb al-Isrā‘īlī, probably a Jewish convert, who in the 960s travelled as the ambassador of Cordovan Caliph al-Ḥakam II’s (961–976) to the court of Emperor Otto I (912–973), and who visited parts of Eastern Europe and Italy, Ireland was the Norsemen’s only stable place of residence.¹³ As the Arab spellings of Ireland and Iceland are very similar, Georg Jacob presumed that the traveller from the Iberian Peninsula was in fact referring to the latter.¹⁴ Given that only fragments of Ibn Ya‘qūb’s travelogue are reproduced in the works of later authors, such as Abū ‘Ubaid al-Bakrī (1014–1094) and the Persian scholar Abū Yahyā Zakariyā’ ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī (c. 1203–1283), it seems likely that Jacob is right.¹⁵ On the other hand, the famous Egyptian geographer and historian Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusain al-Mas‘ūdī (c. 895–957), who died in Fustat just a few years before Ibn Ya‘qūb set out for the Imperial court, confused the Norsemen with the Slavic tribes, wondering how it was possible for them to reach the Iberian Peninsula by ship.¹⁶

Even if the travellers and geographers had different ideas about the Norsemen, their customs, and their daily lives, they all agreed that these mysterious *magicians* once lived exclusively in the cold parts of the world. Al-Bakrī was convinced that people from such regions needed the cold to survive and were risking their lives if they travelled to the Langobard realm in Italy.¹⁷ He argued that they only felt healthy if their humours congealed. If this frozen mixture of blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile – which according to contemporary medical conceptions was responsible for human health and disease¹⁸ – melted or

¹² Polomé 1992.

¹³ Miquel 1975, 348; Lewis 2000, 144–145; Jacob 1927, 26.

¹⁴ Jacob 1927, 26 n. 2.

¹⁵ Wüstenfeld 1994 [1876–1877].

¹⁶ Miquel 1975, 347; Shboul 1979.

¹⁷ Jacob 1927, 16.

¹⁸ Jankrift 2012, 7–9.

even started to boil in the heat of southern countries, Northern people immediately died. During the cold months of the winter, al-Bakrī continued, the earth in their countries would become as hard as stone.¹⁹ Water froze in the wells. When the people sneezed, ice that looked like glass came out of their noses and stuck to their beards until they were able to warm themselves at an open fire. The fire, however, did not just serve to warm the houses and bring some light to the dark Nordic nights. As Arab authors saw it, the specific environment and living conditions also favoured a cultic use of fire, which appeared to them to be shared by all Norsemen, whatever their geographic origin.²⁰ The Spanish diplomat and poet Yahyā ibn Ḥakam al-Bakrī (c. 790), better known as al-Ġazāl, who may have visited Jutland before the middle of the ninth century, clearly stated that the term *al-maḡus* was employed for the Norsemen because they worshipped fire.²¹ Seven decades later, Ibn Faḍlān also drew attention to the special religious significance of fire for the Nordic people he encountered.

Ibn Faḍlān's eyewitness account of a Viking burial ceremony remains unique, something that has inspired a vivid discussion among historians and scholars in related disciplines about the degree to which he augmented fact with fiction.²² There are, however, other written sources and archaeological findings that support the general picture transmitted by the oriental traveller. *Laxdæla Saga*, for example, which was composed in Iceland around 1250, but refers to incidents that occurred between the late ninth and the early eleventh centuries, tells us about the burial of the matriarchal figure, Unnr the Deep-Minded.²³ After a ritual meal, her corpse was brought to a small hill that had been specifically prepared for the burial, placed in a boat, and covered with earth. Indeed, archaeologists have discovered such ship burials in different parts of Scandinavia and the British Isles.²⁴

The best-known examples are certainly the findings in Gokstad and Oseberg in Norway,²⁵ and in Sutton Hoo in East Anglia.²⁶ The Oseberg ship contained the skeletal remains of two women.²⁷ While it is presumed that the older of the two had been a person of high rank, the younger woman was probably

¹⁹ Jacob 1927, 17.

²⁰ Piltz 1988.

²¹ Jacob 1927, 38.

²² Montgomery 2000, 1–3.

²³ Beck 1978, 283; Beck 1997; Bensberg 2000.

²⁴ Beck 1978; Capelle 2004.

²⁵ Christensen, Ingstad, and Myrhe 1992; Sjøvold 1974.

²⁶ Carver 2005; Kendall and Wells 1992.

²⁷ Holck 2006; Berglund 2007.

one of her slaves, who had been sacrificed to accompany her deceased mistress to the other world. A recent DNA analysis of the servant's bones indicates that her ancestors originally lived in the Black Sea region, presumably in Persia. This archaeological record supports Ibn Faḍlān's report of a slave girl being buried with the deceased chieftain.

A different sort of Nordic inhumation is depicted at the beginning of the Old English poem *Beowulf*.²⁸ In this epic narrative, the dead hero Scyld Scefing was placed in a funeral boat and rendered to the sea.

Archaeological evidence proves that it was much more common – particularly if the deceased did not belong to the upper class – to burn the corpse, and then bury the ashes in a grave marked by a stone in the form of a ship. Hundreds of such graves, dating from 800 to 1000, have been discovered at Lindholm Høje, Denmark's largest Viking-era cemetery.²⁹ For a Muslim eyewitness, cremation would automatically have been associated with paganism. Jews and Christians did not burn their dead. The *ar-rūs*, as Ibn Faḍlān called them, acted just like the *as-ṣaqāliba* (heathens). In contrast to Ibn Ya'qūb and al-Ġazāl, neither of whom ever encountered a real *magician*, the traveller from Baghdad certainly knew Zoroastrians. Many of them lived in the region.

The *al-maḡūs* brought the corpses of their deceased to so-called *towers of silence* and exposed them to the vultures.³⁰ While this practice is still common in India today, over the centuries Zoroastrians have also started to bury or cremate their deceased. The Muslims of medieval Spain only knew about the mysterious *magicians* through Arabic writings from the Middle East. These descriptions of the special significance of fire for the *maḡūs* shaped their idea of the Norsemen, resulting in *al-maḡūs* becoming a *nom générique* for Vikings in the Iberian Peninsula.³¹

Although the Arabic reports about encounters with the Norseman include a certain amount of authentic information – for example Ibn Ya'qūb's narrative about whale hunting in Ireland (Iceland) and Ibn Faḍlān's description of their clothing, their weapons, and their appearance³² – there can be no doubt that all of the authors intended to show their readers the barbaric counterpart to their own society – a society civilized by the laws of Islam. In doing so, they employed the same motifs. For example, both Ibn Faḍlān and al-Ġazāl tried their very best to depict Viking society as promiscuous³³ – the latter claimed

²⁸ Newton 1993, 48.

²⁹ Marseen 1992.

³⁰ Boyce 2007.

³¹ Lévi-Provençal 1999, 204.

³² Jacob 1927, 26; Montgomery 2000, 7.

³³ Jacob 1927, 39.

that the Viking queen became very fond of him, and even met with him alone in her private chamber. Nordic women are depicted as the antithesis of chaste and pious Muslim ladies. Ibn Faḍlān established the barbarity of the *maḡūs* by calling them “Allāh’s filthiest creatures”.³⁴ Ibn Ya‘qūb claimed that he had never heard people sing more horribly than the Norsemen of Schleswig, whose voices sounded to him like the barking of dogs.³⁵ Nonetheless, a certain mystery surrounded the wild barbarians: They remained phantoms shrouded in the cold fog of a vague North.

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³⁴ Montgomery 2000, 7.

³⁵ Jacob 1927, 29.

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