

The Rus of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan as Slavic Severians

Problems Concerning Interpretation in Historiography

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In 921–922, Arab traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan visited Volga Bulgaria as a secretary of the embassy of the Abbasid Caliphate. He reflected on his memories of this journey in the literary work known to us today as the “Account of the Lands of the Turks, the Khazars, the Rus, the Saqaliba, the Bashkhirs.” Among the many other tribes described in this document, the most enigmatic is the Rus. The identity of this tribe has been disputed and a topic of debate for a long time. While some have argued that the Rus were Scandinavian Vikings (particularly Swedes), others believe that they were Slavs or even Turks.¹ Furthermore, certain authors took it a step further and attributed the Rus to a specific Slavic tribe, the Severians, which at the time of Ibn Fadlan inhabited lands on the left bank of the Dnipro River, meaning in modern-day northeastern Ukraine. This perspective emerged in the mid-19th century and persisted within Eastern Slavic historiography for approximately a century while having a substantial impact on the understanding of the history of the Rus and Severians.

While the view of the Rus in Ibn Fadlan’s work as being Scandinavians continues to be actively researched and comprehensively covered in publications, the hypothesis of the Rus being identified as the Severians does not receive the attention it deserves in modern studies. Despite the fact that this hypothesis was mostly unsupported, its long existence has given rise to many interesting interpretations of the source and many attempts to find similarities between the cultures of the Vikings and the Severians, which leads to this topic still being important and relevant for researchers of Slavic and Scandinavian historiographies. This article is an attempt to in

1 For recent work on this, see Neil Price, “Ibn Fadlan and the Rituals of the Rus,” in: *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023.

one place collect all interpretations related to the comparison of Ibn Fadlan's Rus with the Slavic tribe of the Severians.

The differences in word choices when translating tiny details of the historical source, as well as the overall interpretation of events described therein, demonstrate how the goals of the interpreters and their affiliation with a specific ethnocultural or political environment may influence their choice of a specific interpretation aligned with their own historical perspectives. This kind of plasticity of historical sources in the skilled hands of an interpreter has always put history at risk of becoming a victim of political opportunism. This is especially relevant today, as political leaders in some countries increasingly resort to constructing narratives about the past to justify their current actions or intentions. One of the many examples of this type of plasticity when interpreting sources is the history of the various perspectives of Russian and Ukrainian linguists and historians on Ahmad ibn Fadlan's report on the Rus discussed in this article.

The source and its translations

Ibn Fadlan's "Account" was for a long time only known to readers based on passages quoted by other authors: particularly Najib Hamadani (second half of the 12th century), Zakariya al-Qazwini (13th century), Amin Razi (late 15th century), and especially by Yaqut al-Hamawi in his "Dictionary of Countries" (13th century). The latter has been translated into many European languages, the first being into Danish by Janus Rasmussen and published in 1814 under the title "On the Arabs, Persians and their Trade with Russia and Scandinavia in the Middle Ages."² Rasmussen's publication served as a foundation for subsequent translations into Swedish (1817) and English (1819).³ In 1823, orientalist Christian Frähn translated Yaqut al-Hamawi's text into German.⁴ The initial translation into the Russian language for Slavic readers was undertaken by Abraham Harkavy and was published in 1870 as a part of a compilation of accounts on the Slavs written by Muslim travelers.⁵ Even though Russian and Ukrainian scholars had access to the original work and its numerous translations, Harkavy's publication signi-

2 Janus Rasmussen, *Om Arabernes og Persernes Handel og Bekjendtskab med Rusland og Skandinavien i Middelalderen*, Copenhagen 1814, 99 pp.

3 "An Historical and Geographical Essay on the Trade and Communication of the Arabians and Persians with Russia and Skandinavia During the Middle Age," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1818:4:20–22, pp. 135–141, 292–300, 460–470.

4 Christian Frähn, *Ibn Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen älterer Zeit*, St. Petersburg 1823, 281 p.

5 Авраам Гаркави, *Сказания мусульманских писателей о Славянах и Русских: (с половины VII в. до конца X в. по Р. X.)*, St. Petersburg 1870, 308 pp.

ificantly simplified their efforts in working with this historical document. Specifically, it was cited by many esteemed scholars in the field of East Slavic history, including Russian archeologist Dmitry Samokvasov and Ukrainian historian Dmytro Bahalii.

At the end of the 19th century, there were doubts in Slavic historiography concerning Ibn Fadlan's account. In 1899, the influential Russian historian Aleksandr Spitsyn published an article in which he questioned the reliability of this source.⁶ This was followed by two articles in response to this questioning written by respected orientalists Ernst Woldemar von Tiesenhausen and Viktor von Rosen, who managed to prove the authenticity of Ibn Fadlan's account.⁷ In 1923, doubts surrounding this source were conclusively dispelled when Bashkir orientalist Ahmed Zeki Velidi Togan discovered the "Mashhad manuscript" (MS 5229) in Iran, which contained an extended and previously unknown version of Ibn Fadlan's account that was copied in the 13th century. In 1935, the government of Iran formally presented photocopies of the "Mashhad manuscript" to the USSR Academy of Sciences, and Ukrainian orientalist Andrii Kovalevskiy was assigned to translate it into Russian.

Unfortunately, as a result of political persecution and Kovalevskiy being arrested in October 1938, his incomplete work was published in Moscow in 1939⁸ without his name being credited. Instead, the title bore the name of Russian orientalist Ignaty Krachkovsky.⁹ In his introduction to this publication, Krachkovsky acknowledged that numerous matters concerning the text and its translation needed to remain unresolved due to the urgency of acquainting Soviet readers with the new historical source.¹⁰

Subsequently, Kovalevskiy embarked on his second endeavor to accurately translate and provide commentary on the manuscript. The result was published under his authorship in Kharkiv, Soviet Ukraine in 1956.¹¹ This

6 For a discussion on this, see Luke Treadwell, "From Kitab to Risala: 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*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023, p. 42.

7 Владимир Тизенгаузен, "В защиту Ибн Фадлана," *Записки Восточного отделения Российского археологического общества* 1900:13:1; Виктор Розен, "Пролегомена к новому изданию Ибн Фадлана," *Записки Восточного отделения Российского археологического общества* 1904:15:3.

8 *Путешествие Ибн-Фадлана на Волгу*, Игнатий Крачковский (trans., ed.), Moscow 1939, 193 pp.

9 Наталія Малиновська, *Життєвий шлях і науковий доробок А. П. Ковалівського (1895–1969 роки): dissertation of candidate of historical sciences: specialty 07.00.01 "History of Ukraine,"* Kharkiv 2008, p. 75.

10 *Путешествие Ибн-Фадлана на Волгу* 1939, pp. 5–6.

11 Андрей Ковалевский, *Книга Ахмеда ибн-Фадлана о его путешествии на Волгу в 921–922 гг.*, Kharkiv 1956, 349 pp.

more elaborate translation, which took all the known variations of Ibn Fadlan's work into account, as well as its translations into various languages, became generally accepted in Slavic historiography and is still widely used by scholars even after more than half a century.¹²

The Rus in Ibn Fadlan's account

Ahmad Ibn Fadlan's depiction of the Rus in Bulgaria stands out as one of the most illuminating accounts of this cultural identity ever recorded by a foreign observer. It touches on all features of this people that could ever draw the attention of a curious traveler from a distant country. Ibn Fadlan in detail described the appearance of the Rus, their customs, beliefs, as well as their daily life during his stay in the capital of Volga Bulgaria, the Great Bulgar.

Based on the description presented by Ibn Fadlan, the Rus were tall ("as palm trees"¹³), had light-colored hair and skin ("blond, red in face, white skinned"), and physically developed bodies ("I have not seen people with more perfect bodies than them"). They were also decorated with tattoos ("from the edge of one of them's nails to his neck is a collection of trees, images and the like"). Their usual weapons were an axe, a sword, and a knife. They used the skins of gray squirrel and sable as money, worshiped wooden idols (a long log with an anthropomorphic face stuck into the ground and surrounded by smaller idols with pillars for sacrifices placed behind them), and their primary commodities for trade with Volga Bulgaria consisted of slaves and furs. Their funerary rite, conducted by a specially trained woman known as the Angel of Death, included cremating the deceased in a boat along with a portion of his fortune and one of his concubines.¹⁴

Description of the Rus' funeral rite and its attribution to Slavic tribes

Ibn Fadlan was fortunate to observe the funeral of a distinguished Rus leader. Even though the rituals and culture of these foreign peoples were profoundly unfamiliar to him, he succeeded in understanding them with

12 *Древняя Русь в свете зарубежных источников, Т.3: Восточные источники*, Татьяна Джаксон, Ирина Коновалова & Александр Подосинов (eds.), Moscow 2009, pp. 67–77.

13 Here and in the remainder of this article, the English translations of Ibn Fadlan's excerpts are adapted after Kovalevskiy (1956) or borrowed unaltered from *Mission to the Volga by Ahmad Ibn Fadlan* by James Montgomery (trans.), New York 2017.

14 Ковалевский 1956, pp. 141–146.

the assistance of a local interpreter while meticulously documenting his experience.¹⁵ His story has since become a significant point of interest for researchers delving into the history of the Rus.

According to Ibn Fadlan, the preparations for the funeral took ten days, during which a feast was held for friends and relatives of the deceased nobleman, while one of the “girls” (“slaves” in James Montgomery’s interpretation) who belonged to the deceased were chosen to accompany him in the afterlife. Two assistants of the Angel of Death were assigned to this “girl” to accompany her everywhere she went, to keep her intoxicated, and to rehearse the ritual with her. On the day of the funeral, the Rus pulled the ship from the river, dragged it onto a prepared wooden structure, and installed a tent on its deck in which they put the body of the deceased. The Rus gathered around the ship and took part in a feast in honor of the dead. In the evening, a dog and a rooster were sacrificed and thrown on the sides of the ship. This was followed by the “girl” being led to an improvised wooden gate (or well, in Rasmussen’s interpretation) and lifted three times over this structure. Each time, she had to exclaim that she saw another world and its dwellers: first her parents, then all of her ancestors, and, finally, her recently deceased master, sitting in a beautiful garden and calling on her to join him there. After this part of the ritual, the girl was brought to the ship, laid next to her deceased husband, and stabbed to death by the Angel of Death. At the end of the ceremony, the ship was set ablaze, reduced to ashes, and interred beneath a mound, on top of which a wooden pillar was erected bearing the inscriptions of two names: the deceased and the ruler of the Rus.¹⁶

In the middle of the 19th century, Russian historian Ivan Belyaev identified parallels between Ibn Fadlan’s account and Slavic pagan practices described in the Primary Chronicle (also known as “The Tale of Bygone Years”, the main written source on the early history of Kievan Rus’, compiled by Kievan monks in the 12th century, based on earlier documents). Russian historians at that time were largely of the opinion that by Slavic pagans, the chronicler referred specifically to the Severians as he usually depicted them as the most wild and uncultured of all East Slavic tribes.¹⁷ Belyaev adhered to this prevailing view, thereby suggesting that the Rus

15 Tonicha Upham, “‘Here I Am, In This Far-Off Land Where We Are Now’: Encountering and Observing Rūs Women in Ibn Fadlan’s *Risala*,” in *Medieval Mobilities: Gendered Bodies, Spaces, and Movements*, Basil Arnould Price, Jane Bonsall & Meagan Khoury (eds.), Cham 2023, p. 132.

16 Ковалевский 1956, pp. 143–146.

17 Дмитрий Багалей, *История Северской земли до половины XIV столетия*, Kyiv 1882, p. 113.

in Ibn Fadlan's story should be understood as specifically being Severians. In his opinion, Scandinavians could not be seen in Ibn Fadlan's story due to the fact that during the times described, they had already altered their ceremonial practice from cremation to inhumation.¹⁸

One of the pioneers of Russian archeology, Dmitry Samokvasov, adhered to a similar idea but on the basis of material sources. After the excavation of Chernihiv burial mounds in the 1870s (at the time thought to be Severian), he came to the conclusion that the funeral rite discovered in these mounds was so similar to the one described by Ibn Fadlan that this should cast aside any doubts about the link between the Slavic Severians and the Rus in Ibn Fadlan's story.¹⁹

In 1882, Ukrainian historian Dmytro Bahalii pushed these hypotheses even further by drawing a number of analogies between Ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus and information on the Severians originating from various sources. For example, he compared the ten-day feast of the Rus with the pagan *trizna* (Slavic funeral feast) described in the Primary Chronicle. Dilapidated monuments found on the tops of some medieval burial mounds on Severian territory were compared to Ibn Fadlan's description of the construction of a burial hill and the erection of a pillar on top of it. He compared the cremation of the "girl" along with her deceased master to the Ukrainian custom of burying unmarried people in wedding clothes, while the ritual of communicating with the dead through a well was compared with the Ukrainian belief that the spirits of ancestors lived in wells. He also found analogies for the sacrifice of a rooster in Ukrainian ethnographic material.²⁰

At the end of the 19th century, another Ukrainian historian, Vasylyaskoronsky, wholeheartedly endorsed Bahalii's views on the Rus as Severians, while also corroborating these views with additional evidence gathered from Severian archeological sites excavated after the latter's book was published. Like those before him, Lyaskoronsky was eager to see Slavs in the stories of formidable travelers encountered by Ibn Fadlan in Bulgar, employing every available source at his disposal to support this notion.²¹ At the same time, the hypothesis regarding the Rus being attributed to the Slavs was supported by one of the most prominent Ukrainian histori-

18 Иван Беляев, "Русские земли до прибытия князя Рюрика в Новгород," in *Временник императорского общества истории древностей российских* 1850:8, pp. 16–17.

19 Дмитрий Самоквасов, "Северянские курганы и их значение для истории," in *Труды третьего археологического съезда в России, бывшего в Киеве в августе 1874 года. Т. 1*, Kyiv 1878, pp. 220, 223.

20 Багалей 1882, p. 84–90.

21 Василий Ляскоронский, *История Переяславской земли с древнейших времен до половины 13 столетия*, Kyiv 1897, p. 134.

ans, Mykhailo Hrushevsky. Although he highlighted certain similarities between the customs detailed by Ibn Fadlan and those of the Severians, he also noted that the narrative of the Arab traveler included elements typical of Scandinavian and Khazar cultures.²²

Over the next decades, the hypothesis regarding identifying the Rus in Arab sources with the Slavic people, developed by Russian and Ukrainian scholars in the 19th century, was generally supported and repeated by many Slavic historians. However, not many of them specified which particular Slavic tribe should be associated with the Rus.

In 1940, Russian historian Vladimir Mavrodin attributed the Rus specifically to the Severians by pointing out the direct analogy between an accompanying burial of a female slave found in a Severian burial near Chernihiv and the sacrificed female slave described by Ibn Fadlan.²³ Furthermore, he interpreted the stonework unearthed in the famous Black Tomb mound in Chernihiv as a pedestal for a wooden idol and compared it with a pillar on the mound in Ibn Fadlan's story.²⁴

Thus, in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, the link between the Rus and the Severians had many adherents in Slavic historiography. However, most supporters of this perspective primarily relied on the similarity between some features of the Rus' funeral rite described by Ibn Fadlan and archeological findings in Severian burial mounds. Further research, however, showed that these burials belonged to *knyaz druzhina* (princely squads), mainly consisting of Scandinavian mercenaries (Varangians). This led to the tendency of identifying Severians as Rus to gradually lose its general support in Slavic historiography, despite some evidence based on sources outside of archeology.

In this regard, it is worth considering some passages from the text of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan in more detail, as well as various interpretations of these passages in the literature, which influenced the notion of identifying Ibn Fadlan's Rus with Slavic Severians or Scandinavian Vikings.

22 Михайло Грушевський, *Виїмки з жерел до історії України-Руси*, Lviv 1895, pp. 41, 45–46; Михайло Грушевський, *Очеркъ історії Українського народу*, St. Petersburg 1896, pp. 37–38; Михайло Грушевський, *Історія України-Руси*, Lviv 1898, pp. 152, 192.

23 Владимир Мавродин, *Очерки истории Левобережной Украины (с древнейших времен до второй половины XIV века)*, St. Petersburg 2002, p. 123.

24 Мавродин 2002, p. 138.

Axes of the Rus

Describing the Rus, Ibn Fadlan pointed out that they never parted with their weapons, which Kovalevskiy translated as “an ax, a sword and a knife” (the same in Montgomery). In his first translation, however, Kovalevskiy used the more specific word “sekira” (same in Harkavy) instead of an “ax.”²⁵ Unlike “sekira,” which is an ax adapted for combat purposes, a common ax can be used not only as a weapon but also as a tool for cutting wood. This new variant of the translation was influenced²⁶ by Alexander Yakubovsky’s article, in which the author analyzed Ibn Miskawayh’s mention of an ax among the usual craft tools of the Rus and compared it to an ax in Ibn Fadlan’s story. Yakubovsky expressed an opinion (that Kovalevskiy also agreed with) that for the Rus, the ax served as both a combat weapon and a craft tool. This view finds relative confirmation in Ibn Fadlan’s writings on the need for the Rus to build large wooden dwellings upon arriving on the banks of the Volga River.²⁷

The leading role of axes in the construction work of the Severians, who lived in wooded areas, is evidenced by archaeological discoveries.²⁸ However, this tool was common among all peoples using wood as a building material, which means that the chances of identifying the Rus as being the Severians (or any other Slavs) or the Scandinavians are the same.

The various interpretations of this item by various authors, who often categorize it as either a weapon or a tool, reflect their predisposition to viewing Ibn Fadlan’s Rus in one of two distinct lights: either as a warband (likely of Scandinavian origin) or as a group of transient settlers hailing from wooded regions (presumably Slavs). This demonstrates how an interpretation of just one word can influence (or be influenced by) a completely different reading of the source.

Swords of the Rus

The description of swords used by the Rus caused significant difficulties for interpreters. Ibn Fadlan characterized them as “Frankish swords with broad, ridged blades.”²⁹ The Arabic word for ridges related to swords was

25 Путешествие Ибн-Фадлана на Волгу 1939, p. 78.

26 Путешествие Ибн-Фадлана на Волгу 1939, p. 237.

27 Александр Якубовский, “Ибн-Мискавейх о походе русов в Бердаа в 332. 943/4 г.,” *Византийский временник* 1926:24, pp. 90–91.

28 For a recent work on this, see Юрій Пуголюков, *Будівельна справа літописних сіверя, Опішнія* 2016, pp. 288–291.

29 *Mission to the Volga* 2017, p. 32.

translated by Frähn as “wavy striped” (*wellenförmig gestreift*³⁰), while Harkavy interpreted it as simply “wavy” (*волнообразные*³¹). These interpretations offered a different idea of the swords being curved rather than having ridges. Kovalevskiy conducted a more in-depth linguistic analysis, found analogies of Ibn Fadlan’s phrase in other Arabic sources, and translated it as “grooved blades” (*бороздчатые клинки*). In a commentary to this piece, he explained that the grooves probably served to channel away blood when the blade was extracted from flesh.³² Rasmussen also used the word “grooves” (*mærkede med Furer*) in his interpretation,³³ adding that such grooves were a distinct feature of Scandinavian swords.³⁴

Fur in the Rus’ system of exchange and its possible link to the Severians

Ibn Fadlan’s notion concerning the Rus using squirrel and sable skins as money resembles the Primary Chronicle’s mention of the Severian tribute to the Khazars: “ermine and squirrel from each smoke,”³⁵ which gives us reason to believe that the Severians also used furs from forest animals as a medium of exchange.

This fragment is missing in both Yaqut al-Hamawi’s work and in the Mashhad manuscript, and it was only conveyed in the retellings relayed by Amin Razi and Najib Hamadani. In Slavic translation, it was introduced only in 1956 by Kovalevskiy.³⁶ Therefore, it mostly eluded the attention of the researchers of Severian history, as Ibn Fadlan’s work at that time was no longer regarded as a source on the history of the Severians.

It is worth noting a contradiction that has crept into this fragment of Ibn Fadlan’s story (or its retelling). It states that the Rus do not use the whole skin but “without fur, tail, front and hind legs and head.” However, this claim is immediately followed by a contrasting one: “If anything is missing, then the skin becomes a defective coin,”³⁷ which indicates the need for the presence of these components of the skin but not their absence.

30 Frähn 1823, p. 5.

31 Гаркави 1870, с. 93.

32 Ковалевский 1956, p. 141.

33 Rasmussen 1814, p. 59.

34 For a discussion on this, see Путешествие Ибн-Фадлана на Волгу 1939, p. 131.

35 *Повесть временных лет*, Аполлон Кузьмин (trans.) & Олег Платонов (ed.), Moscow 2014, p. 67.

36 Ковалевский 1956, pp. 45, 141.

37 Ковалевский 1956, p. 141.

The Rus' funeral feast and its link to Slavic *trizna*

Ibn Fadlan described the Rus' funeral tradition of dividing the deceased individual's property into three parts, two of which were spent on the ceremony: making clothes and preparing alcoholic drinks. Ibn Fadlan used the Arabic word *nabith* for these drinks, which in Arab countries meant any fermented drink.³⁸ Preparations for the final funeral ritual lasted ten days, during which the Rus consumed the said *nabith* in such quantities that "sometimes one of them dies cup in hand."³⁹

According to Belyaev, Ibn Fadlan's story is very similar to the Slavic *trizna* (funeral feast) mentioned in the Primary Chronicle: "if anyone dies, they perform a *trizna* upon him."⁴⁰ Based on this analogy, Belyaev proposed the origin of the Slavic word *trizna* as originating from the phrase "divide into three parts" (*tri* means three in Slavic), which over time became a generalized term for a ritual feast held during funerals.⁴¹ In this case, identifying the Rus as part of the Slavic people significantly shaped subsequent reasoning, altered the understanding of other sources, and impacted the reinterpretation of an ancient Slavic tradition for which 19th-century historians lacked alternative sources of information.

Accompanying the burial: Girl, wife, or slave?

The female ritually sacrificed during the funeral process is mentioned by Ibn Fadlan as one of the "girls" of the deceased (in Harkavy and Kovalevskii; "slave" in Montgomery) but not as being one of his wives. Belyaev linked this fact to the indication in the Primary Chronicle that Severians never married but snatched their girls.⁴² Thus, these girls, according to Belyaev, lived with Severian men as slaves "to satisfy their animal voluptuousness."⁴³ Mavrodin used this part of Ibn Fadlan's story as evidence of the degraded position of women in Severian society.⁴⁴

Bahalii explained Ibn Fadlan's report on the humiliation of women in Rus society as an exaggeration of an Arab traveler who just wanted to impress his readers. The girl's desire to part with her life was explained by

38 Richard Burton, *One Thousand and One Nights: Complete Arabian Nights Collection*, Csorna 2016, fn. 393.

39 *Mission to the Volga* 2017, p. 35.

40 *Полное собрание русских летописей. Т. I. Лаврентьевская летопись. Вып. I. Повесть временных лет*, Leningrad 1926, p. 15.

41 Беляев 1850, pp. 17–18.

42 *Полное собрание русских летописей* 1926, p. 15.

43 Беляев 1850, p. 16.

44 Мавродин 2002, p. 132.

the strong Severian belief in the afterlife. In his opinion, the deceased man probably died a bachelor, which is why he needed to be married after death. This view was most likely based on the retelling of the story of Ibn Fadlan by Amin Razi, in which the funeral rite of the Rus is also referred to as a wedding through which the slave girl became a legal wife of her deceased master. Al-Masudi, another Arab traveler, mentioned this tradition of the Rus and Slavs living in Atil, the capital of the Khazar Khaganate: "If a man dies, his wife is burned with him [...] If an unmarried man dies, he will then be married after death."⁴⁵

According to Bahalii, the girl followed her owner willingly, since it was the only way that she could get to heaven (the garden she sees during the ritual and to which her deceased husband calls her).⁴⁶ This view is also shared by those scholars who tend to interpret Ibn Fadlan's Rus as Scandinavians. For example, Jens Peter Schjødt, Eric Christiansen, Wladyslaw Duczko, and Morten Warmind agreed that after undergoing the described initiation rite, a slave girl had an opportunity to increase her status and get to Valhalla.⁴⁷ Thorir Hraundal, on the other hand, insists that according to Scandinavian tradition, a female, and especially a slave, was unable to enter Valhalla, the description of which in Scandinavian literature is also noticeably different from the "beautiful green garden" in Ibn Fadlan's story.⁴⁸

Unlike most interpreters, who understood Ibn Fadlan's "girl" as a slave,⁴⁹ Kovalevskiy insisted that her communication with ancestors, which was part of the ritual described, indicates that she could not be a slave, for in that case, "none of the surrounding Rus should have been interested in her ancestors, whom, perhaps, this Rus leader killed when taking her into slavery."⁵⁰

45 Древняя Русь в свете зарубежных источников 2009, p. 113.

46 Багалей 1882, pp. 84–89.

47 Morten Warmind, "Ibn Fadlan in the Context of His Age," in *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia*, Copenhagen 1995, pp. 131–135; Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*, Oxford 2002, pp. 296–297; Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*, Leiden & Boston 2004, p. 145; Jens Peter Schjødt, "Ibn Fadlan's Account of a Rus Funeral: To What Degree Does It Reflect Nordic Myths?" in *Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia. Vol. 1*, Turnhout 2007.

48 Thorir Hraundal, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus in Arabic Sources," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2014:10, p. 85.

49 Aside from the authors mentioned above, see Татьяна Калинина, "Термин 'люди дома' ('ахл ал-байт') у Ибн Фадлана по отношению к обществу русов," in *Древнейшие государства на территории СССР. Материалы и исследования. 1992–1993 годы*, Moscow 1995, p. 136.

50 Ковалевский 1956, pp. 254, 256.

Looking into the afterlife through a doorframe, gate trim, or milk pail?

One of the most intricate parts for interpreters was the ritual of a “girl” appealing to her departed ancestors as described by Ibn Fadlan. In particular, the Arabic word for the object through which the “girl” looked into the afterlife caused significant difficulties. Rasmussen interpreted it as a milking pail (*Malkeṣpand*), which was dug into the ground.⁵¹ It was represented in the same way in the English variant of Rasmussen’s interpretation: “a thing which they concealed in the earth, resembling in the mouth a milk pail.”⁵² Frähn and Harkavy interpreted this object as a “doorframe”⁵³ (same in Montgomery⁵⁴). Kovalevskiy translated it as a “gate trim” (*обвязка ворот*): “led the girl to something they had done earlier, like a gate trim”⁵⁵ (in his earlier translation it was indicated as a “big gate”⁵⁶).

Bahalii interpreted Rasmussen’s version of the buried milking pail as a symbolic well that had to be improvised fairly quickly in a foreign land. He also found analogies of communicating with ancestors through wells in Ukrainian folklore. In his opinion, the Severians believed that wells were “holes in the ground through which one can see the afterlife.”⁵⁷ This hypothesis was based on ethnographic information concerning well spirits (*krinita*), which he identified with “mermaids” (*rusalka*), who in Slavic folklore represented the afterlife. However, this opinion was challenged by Ukrainian ethnographer Pelaheia Lytvynova, who drew attention to the differences between *krinita* and *rusalka* and showed that the cult of the Slavic goddess Krinita was always associated with birth but never with death.⁵⁸

Angel of Death: A witch, a priestess, or just a keeper of traditions?

An old woman who was at the head of the funeral ritual in Ibn Fadlan’s story seems to indicate the existence of a priestly stratum among the Rus. The appearance of this woman impressed the Arab traveler: “And I saw

51 Rasmussen 1814, p. 66.

52 “An Historical and Geographical Essay” 1818, p. 463.

53 Frähn 1823, p. 17; Гаркави 1870, с. 98.

54 *Mission to the Volga* 2017, p. 36.

55 Ковалевский 1956, p. 144.

56 Путешествие Ибн-Фадлана на Волгу 1939, p. 82.

57 Багалеи 1882, pp. 89, 90.

58 Пелагея Литвинова, “Криница – богиня плодородия у северян,” *Киевская старина* 1884:8:4, pp. 695–697.

that she was a strong-built old woman, big and gloomy”⁵⁹ (“gloomy and corpulent but neither young nor old” in Montgomery). Harkavy translated this phrase as “and I saw her black (dark red), thick (shiny), with a fierce look.”⁶⁰ In his first translation, Kovalevskiy used the word “witch” in this passage: “and I saw that she was a witch.”⁶¹ Rasmussen also interpreted her as a witch: “she had the appearance of a thick, yellow, wrinkled witch.”⁶²

The Angel of Death, as this woman is called in Ibn Fadlan’s story, supervised the preparation for the ritual (making festive clothes for the deceased) and carried out its main part: the sacrificial murder of the “girl.” The assistants of the Angel of Death, whom Ibn Fadlan designated as her daughters, also performed some functions in the ritual: they guarded the girl, washed her, and received farewell gifts from her at one of the final stages of the ritual (“the two ankle rings she was wearing”⁶³). The Angel of Death also received a gift: bracelets from the hands of the “girl.”

If we regard these gifts as payment for performing the ritual, it is appropriate to perceive the Angel of Death and her “daughters” as professionals, whose craft was to perform rituals linked to death and the afterlife. Kovalevskiy also referred to the Angel of Death as “a professional in her field.”⁶⁴ Vladimir Petrukhin perceived the Angel of Death as akin to the Baba Yaga in Russian folklore; that is, a witch-priest who was believed to be a guide in the afterlife.⁶⁵ However, based on Ibn Fadlan’s report, the Rus performed most of the other rituals themselves, without the help of any specially trained professional, which led Bahalii to the conclusion that the Severians did not have a priestly stratum. He argued that the Angel of Death was not a priestess but merely a keeper of traditions.⁶⁶

Bahalii also questioned the authenticity of the term Angel of Death, which, in his opinion, was an Arabic interpretation of some other Slavic term heard by Ibn Fadlan or conveyed by his local translator. Tina Sass and Morten Warmind came to the same conclusion but from the position of the Scandinavian identity of the Rus.⁶⁷ Kovalevskiy opposed such assumptions, drawing attention to the fact that Ibn Fadlan several times repeats that the

59 Ковалевский 1956, p. 144.

60 Гаркави 1870, с. 97.

61 Путешествие Ибн-Фадлана на Волгу 1939, p. 81.

62 “An Historical and Geographical Essay” 1818, p. 462.

63 Ковалевский 1956, p. 145.

64 Ковалевский 1956, p. 249.

65 Владимир Петрухин, *Начало этнокультурной истории Руси IX–XI веков*, Smolensk & Moscow 1995, pp. 212–213.

66 Багалеи 1882, pp. 87, 88, 95.

67 Tina Sass & Morten Warmind, “Mission Saqaliba,” *Chaos* 1989:11.

Rus themselves used this name for her, which, in his opinion, proves that there was no room for any misinterpretations.⁶⁸

Slavic or Scandinavian burial tradition?

The funeral of a noble Rus in Ibn Fadlan's story ends with the construction of a mound over the ashes of the burnt ship, the erection of a pillar (*kbadhank*, or birch in Montgomery), and names being written on this pillar. As mentioned above, Samokvasov and Bahalii emphasized the definite similarity between this part of the story and Severian tradition as depicted by chroniclers. However, this ritual does not entirely align with the description of pagan funerals in the Primary Chronicle, which states that "the dead would be cremated and then the bones collected and put in a small vessel and placed on a pillar along a road."⁶⁹

Belyaev rationalized the differences between these two sources by the Severians having to adjust their traditions in a foreign land. He explained that the Severians had to pour a mound on the ashes of the cremated body to protect it from local vandals.⁷⁰

Bahalii adopted a contrasting perspective. He referred to Samokvasov's hypothesis regarding three distinct types of Severian burial customs and pointed out that Ibn Fadlan describes the funeral rites designed specifically for noble Severians, whereas the chronicler depicts the practices of ordinary tribesmen. In addition, Bahalii explained the discrepancy between the mound (in Ibn Fadlan) and the pillar (in the Primary Chronicle) as being a misinterpretation of the Slavic word "pillar" used by the chronicler. Referring to Ukrainian ethnographer and philologist Oleksandr Kotliarevsky, who derived the etymology of the Slavic word *stolp* (pillar) from the Sanskrit *stupa* (hill of earth and stones, high grave),⁷¹ he arrived at the conclusion that the "pillar" in the Primary Chronicle can be also understood as a mound, which makes it similar to Ibn Fadlan's story. Bahalii explained other discrepancies by referring to the exceptionally high rank of the buried Rus, examples of which could be very hard to find in other burials on Severian land.⁷²

On the other hand, many scholars pointed out the similarity of the funeral described by Ibn Fadlan with the funeral rites typical for Scandinavian countries as well as for the Varangians on Slavic lands (mainly consisting

68 Ковалевский 1956, p. 249.

69 Полное собрание русских летописей 1926, p. 15.

70 Беляев 1850, p. 19.

71 Александр Котляревский, *О погребальных обычаях языческих славян*, Moscow 1868, p. 122.

72 Багалей 1882, pp. 77–82.

of Scandinavian warriors).⁷³ For example, Petrukhin drew attention to the law of the Scandinavian god Odin, reflected in the Ynglinga Saga:⁷⁴ “All dead men should be burned, and their belongings laid with them upon the pile, and the ashes be cast into the sea or buried in the earth [...] For men of consequence a mound should be raised to their memory, and for all other warriors who had been distinguished for manhood a standing stone.”⁷⁵

It is also noteworthy that remains of horses, dogs, and chickens were found in the burial mounds of rich ancient Rus warriors on the northern outskirts of Chernihiv (based on the results of excavations in 1952), while in some mounds, accompanying burials of women were discovered next to the deceased. Three of the excavated mounds contained traces of complex wooden structures (platforms), upon which the cremation was carried out. Based on these findings, Ukrainian historian David Blifeld concluded that the burial ritual in these mounds was in many ways similar to the funeral of a noble Rus described by Ibn Fadlan.⁷⁶ First, he attributed these burials to elite Varangians, while also drawing some parallels with the Primary Chronicle,⁷⁷ where it describes Slavic pagan burial tradition: “and then they create a big *klada* and put the body on it, and burn it.”⁷⁸ The term *klada* mentioned here has ancient origins and fell out of common usage among Slavic people centuries ago, thus presenting a challenge for modern interpreters. Most of them agree that it designates either a bonfire, a large pile of firewood, or some wooden construction.⁷⁹ Ibn Fadlan describes a similar construction for installing a ship in which the deceased was then burned: “Four pillars made of wood were placed [...] and around them there was also something like large platforms made of wood.”⁸⁰

73 For more on this, see Давид Бліфельд, “Древньоруський моги́льник в Чернігові,” *Археологія* 1965:18; Юрий Жарнов, “Животные в погребальном обряде курганов периода становления древнерусского государства,” *Советская археология* 1991:2, p. 85; Петрухин 1995, pp. 198, 206–207.

74 Петрухин 1995, pp. 206.

75 *The Heimskringla*, vol. 1, Samuel Laing (trans.), New York 1889, p. 279.

76 Бліфельд, 1965, p. 134.

77 Бліфельд, 1965, p. 133.

78 Полное собрание русских летописей 1926, p. 15.

79 Полное собрание русских летописей. Т. 1: Лаврентьевская летопись. Вып. 1: *Повесть временных лет*, Евфимий Карский (ed.), Leningrad, 1926, pp. 13–14; Полное собрание русских летописей. Т. 2: Ипатьевская летопись, Алексей Шахматов (ed.), St. Petersburg 1908, p. 938; *Повесть временных лет*, Аполлон Кузьмин (trans.) & Олег Платонов (ed.), Moscow 2014, p. 9; *Повесть временных лет. Ч. 1*, Дмитрий Лихачев & Борис Романов (trans.) & Варвара Адрианова-Перетц (ed.), Moscow & Leningrad 1950, p. 211, 228; *Повесть временных лет*, Дмитрий Лихачев (trans.) & Варвара Адрианова-Перетц (ed.), St. Petersburg 1996, p. 147; Багалеи 1882, p. 75.

80 Ковалевский 1956, p. 70.

Interpretation tendencies and their historiographical background

The interaction of Russian and Ukrainian interpreters with Ibn Fadlan's report has resulted in a considerable variety of views on many details that may identify who the Rus were. The emergence of such diverse interpretations of the same source might seem random, but it is not: Each interpretation fits into a specific pattern having emerged in the historiography of Eastern Slavic history.

The Scandinavian Varangians have always been an inconvenient element in the history of Eastern Slavic statehood. On the one hand, they were outsiders and conquerors; on the other, they were the founders of the Kyivan Rus, a state that encompassed numerous large and small Eastern Slavic tribes. The very fact that a state with a predominantly Slavic population was named after the Scandinavian conquerors, the Rus, was uncomfortable in later historiography, especially after the Scandinavian elite merged with the Slavic population. Consequently, any opportunity to reinterpret the historical Rus as Slavs was very tempting, leading to some bizarre interpretations of the sources. This is why Slavic researchers so eagerly embraced the similarity between the chronicles' descriptions of the Severians and Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus.

The Severians, on the other hand, were one of the most numerous and influential tribes that became part of Kyivan Rus, rivaled only by the Polans, who founded the state's capital Kyiv. The role of the Severians in the history of Eastern Slavs, Ukraine, and Russia had to be reckoned with. However, they did not join the Kyiv alliance peacefully, but were incorporated as a result of a military campaign led by Scandinavian prince Oleg (Helgi) into the left bank of the Dnipro River. This consequently led to tense relations between the Severians and the political center of the new state. This, in turn, led to the later attempts to justify the subjugation of this tribe in historical literature.

In the early attempts to construct the history of the Rus, as Christian monks wrote the first chronicles, the notion was formed that the Severians were a wild pagan people who needed to be conquered and civilized. This notion left an indelible mark on all subsequent historiography and continued to be influential, albeit less so, up until the 20th century. With the introduction of a new source in the 19th century, the work of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, this perspective was only reinforced as the source vividly described the pagan traditions and brutality of the Rus (who at that time were identified as Severians), which has complemented the views of the chroniclers.

In the meantime, the diminishing role of Kyiv and the emergence of a

new political power in northern Rus (with capitals in Vladimir, and later Moscow and Saint Petersburg) created conditions for forming a new perspective on the past history of this country. It was no longer necessary to draw a distinction between the Kyivan Polans and the subjugated Severians, as both tribes became an uncomfortable reminder for the northern cities of their former peripheral status to the Kyivan metropolis and of Kyiv's primacy in the history of Rus statehood. To justify the historical significance of the northern capitals, sources were reviewed and all mentions of the early settlements of the Rus in Novgorod were emphasized in the historical narrative. The Dnieper tribes were hence depicted as equally wild and pagan, in need of being culturized by the northern colonizers – Novgorodians led by Scandinavian princes. From this perspective, it was advantageous to look at Ibn Fadlan's Rus as either Slavs in general, without any specific tribal affiliation, or as Scandinavians.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, with the rise of Ukrainian self-awareness and an interest in Ukraine's history, a third tendency emerged: the antiquation and glorification of Ukraine's past by searching for ethnocultural links between the modern people of Ukraine and the more ancient peoples that once inhabited its territory. This tendency was pioneered by Mykhailo Antonovskiy, followed by Petro Holubovskiy in Kyiv and Dmytro Bahalii in Kharkiv. All three were particularly interested in the history of Severians and put in a lot of effort to glorify this tribe and link it to modern Ukrainians. The only difference between these three was that Bahalii was the first to incorporate Ibn Fadlan's source into his research, thereby founding the northeastern Ukrainian tradition of interpreting the Rus as Severians. This reading of the source enabled linking the people of eastern Ukraine not only to the Rus, widely known in the medieval world and admired by historians, but also with the formation of the very Kyivan Rus.

Thus, the three historiographical tendencies described here created the basis for various interpretations of Ibn Fadlan's text on the Rus people. The roots of these differences were formed in competing views on the emergence of Rus as a state, which determined the intentions and subjectivity of researchers who tried to interpret the source in a way that supported their broader views.

Conclusion

The existence of many variations in the research literature with regard to the translation and interpretation of some phrases and words in Ahmad Ibn Fadlan's story indicates how the intentions of the authors have influenced their interpretations of the source: Most of the authors who were inclined

to adopt the Severian version of the Rus were either engaged in researching the history of the Severians or originated from the territory of their habitat (northeastern Ukraine). Moreover, Ukrainian researchers, who were interested in the positive image of their ancestors, the Severians, tended to more daringly search for similarities between the Rus and the Severians and were inclined to take on softer interpretations of their customs, while many Russian historians either saw the Rus as Slavs in general or tried to use Ibn Fadlan's story as proof of the savagery and immorality of the Severians.

As we have seen, Kovalevskiy, who was born and worked in northeastern Ukraine, tended to translate the words of Ibn Fadlan in ways that were more beneficial for viewing the Rus as Slavs. Bahalii, who not only lived and worked in northeastern Ukraine but also actively and specifically studied the history of the Severians and was for a long time recognized as a leading expert in this field, built many hypotheses on this topic based on the interpretations of Ibn Fadlan's words that brought the Rus closer to the Severians. Ukrainian historian David Blifeld, whose main interest was in the archeology of medieval Chernihiv (northeastern Ukraine) resorted to the etymology of the Old Slavic language and Sanskrit to fuse the story of Ibn Fadlan with the Slavic Primary Chronicle. Contrary to this, Ukrainian historians whose focus was on central or western Ukraine, such as Hrushevsky, tended to approach these hypotheses with skepticism, instead leaning toward attributing the Rus as being Slavs in general.

In modern literature, the generally accepted version is that the Rus of Ibn Fadlan should be understood as Scandinavians, or at least as a group of people with a significant Scandinavian core.⁸¹ The number of features that have no analogies in the Scandinavian traditions were explained either by foreign influences⁸² or by the amalgamation of people of different origins in one group in the Volga-Caspian region.⁸³ Nevertheless, the description of the Rus in the Bulgar, presented in the story conveyed by Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, has been given various interpretations in the literature in recent centuries. Each of these interpretations may significantly influence not only the view of the Rus as Scandinavian Vikings or Slavic Severians but also the development of the historiography on these topics.

The colorful and detailed description of the Rus presented by Ibn Fadlan prompted researchers of Slavic antiquities to form many interesting hypotheses on the lives, features, and history of the Severians. Although many of these

81 For recent work on this, see Price 2023, pp. 177–197.

82 Peter Foote & David Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, London 1970, p. 408–411.

83 Hraundal 2014, pp. 65–97; Thorir Hraundal, “Identities, Ethnicities, Cultures: Ibn Fadlan and the Rus on the Middle Volga,” in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023.

hypotheses have not survived the test of time, they still offer a significant interest for studying the historiography of Slavic and particularly Severian history, as well as for researchers interested in the history of Scandinavian Vikings. More so, as shown above, interpretations of some fragments of Ibn Fadlan's account are too numerous and varied, while sometimes relying on other sources, which, in turn, also come with controversial and multi-layered interpretations. All these factors contribute to the ongoing appeal of the discussed source for researchers in the fields of Scandinavian and Slavic history and historiography.

Summary

The article delves into the historical interpretations of the Rus tribe mentioned by Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, an Arab traveler who visited Volga Bulgaria in the early 10th century. The Rus have for a long time been the subject of debate, with various theories proposing their origins as either being Scandinavian Vikings, Slavs, or even a specific Slavic tribe called the Severians. While modern scholarship leans toward identifying the Rus as Scandinavians, this article focuses on the less-explored hypothesis that the Rus were Severians. This view was prominent in Eastern Slavic historiography for nearly a century but has since become less popular.

The article aims to compile interpretations aligning Ibn Fadlan's descriptions of the Rus with the Severians, thus highlighting how the backgrounds and intentions of historians have influenced their translations and interpretations. In particular, Ukrainian historians with ties to northeastern Ukraine, where the Severians lived, often presented the Rus in a more favorable light while linking them to Slavic ancestry. On the other hand, Russian historians were more likely to depict the Severians negatively or identify the Rus as Slavs in general.

The article emphasizes the impact of these varied interpretations on the understanding of both Rus and Severian history, noting that while the Scandinavian origin of the Rus is now widely accepted, the Severian hypothesis continues to offer valuable insights for researchers of Slavic and Scandinavian historiography. The text also underscores the broader issue of how interpretations of historical sources can be molded to fit contemporary political or cultural narratives.

Keywords: Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, Rus, Severians, historiography, Scandinavians on the Volga

