

Translation, Interpretation, and the Politics of Ibn Faḍlān

Identifying (with) the Rūs. A Response to Maksym
Kyrychenko (Scandia debatt 2025:1)

Tonicha Upham

When Ibn Faḍlān burst onto the European orientalist scene in 1814, he did so in service to a Norse antiquarian agenda. Presented in Danish translation by Danish orientalist Jens Lassen Rasmussen, Ibn Faḍlān's European debut occurred under the auspices of an essay prize for *Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab*.¹ Presenting translations of a series of Arabic and Persian sources on the Rūs and Scandinavia, Rasmussen noted that the contents of Arabic sources on the Rūs exhibited “ikke ringe liighed med vore Fædre” [No small resemblance to our forefathers].² For Rasmussen, the Rūs of Ibn Faḍlān's tenth-century travel account might as well have been his own ancestors.

So too did German orientalist Christian Martin Frähn have the contemporary ramifications of the Rūs in mind when he worked on his German translation of Ibn Faḍlān in St. Petersburg in the decade following Rasmussen's publication. For Frähn, participating in an academic agenda which sought to bring Russian scholarship in line with European developments, the opportunity to collect and translate Arabic texts on the Rūs such as Ibn Faḍlān was a means of expressing his appreciation for his “zweites Vaterland” [second fatherland].³

Nor was such personal reflective sentiment limited to the Rūs presented in Ibn Faḍlān's eyewitness travel account. Bashkir orientalist and politician Ahmet Zeki Validi Togan, who identified the fullest contiguous version of

- 1 Hans Christian Ørsted, *Oversigt over det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Forhandlinger og dets Medlemmers Arbejder i de sidste to Aar: 1813–1815*, København 1816, pp. 17–18.
- 2 Jens Lassen Rasmussen, *Om Arabernes og Persernes Handel og Bekjendtskab med Rusland og Skandinavien i Middelalderen*, København 1814, p. 70.
- 3 Christian Martin Frähn, *Ibn Foszlans und andere Araber Berichte über die Russen älterer Zeit*, St. Petersburg 1823, p. xxxvi.

the Arabic travel account in Mashhad, Iran in 1923, was moved by the experience to recall a childhood dream. As a small boy in the 1890s, he writes in his memoirs, he dreamed that Russian tsar Nikolai II presented him with golden leaves on which were written an Arabic history of the Bashkirs and Bulghārs; Togan's father interpreted this as a sign that he would one day discover an important text on the topic of his people's history.⁴

It is no surprise at all, then, that Maksym Kyrychenko should have been able to identify strands of Ukrainian historiography pertaining to readings of Ibn Faḍlān's Rūs, and their identification with the Slavic Severians. As he outlined in a debate article for this journal, this hypothesis is "mostly unsupported", and has been abandoned.⁵

This article constitutes a response to Kyrychenko's summary of historic arguments for identifying Ibn Faḍlān's Rūs as Slavic Severians. Its primary response is not in arguing that the Rūs must be read as Scandinavians, or among other nationalist lines, nor in individually taking to task each use of Ibn Faḍlān's account to render the Rūs as Severians; as I will discuss, and as Kyrychenko acknowledges, the issue at hand here is not that the Rūs can credibly be considered to be Severian. Rather, I offer a different perspective on the study of Ibn Faḍlān, providing an enhanced overview of the historiography and translation history of Ibn Faḍlān in order to emphasise what was made accessible, when, and under what circumstances. I also engage with Kyrychenko's methodology, exploring the issues inherent in comparing translations without recourse to any version of the Arabic text. Ibn Faḍlān is a rich and giving source, and one which possesses a colourful historiography across multiple fields, nations, and academic contexts. Where Kyrychenko's summary of Ukrainian and Russian historiography presents a scholarly arena which, like Scandinavian studies, does not presently demand Arabic of those scholars who engage with Ibn Faḍlān, I hope this assessment will be especially useful in parsing the translational differences enumerated in Kyrychenko's article and serve as a careful historiographical grounding of Ibn Faḍlān and his Rūs.

Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah

Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān was a member of an embassy of sorts, dispatched from Baghdad by 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Muqtadir in 921AD/309AH in order to deliver money, medicines, and spiritual support to the recently-converted

4 Ahmed Zeki Validi Togan, *Memoirs. National Existence and Cultural Struggles of Turkistan and Other Muslim Eastern Turks*, trans. H. B. Paksoy, North Charleston 2012, p. 378.

5 Maksym Kyrychenko, "Scandia debatt: The Rus of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan as Slavic Severians. Problems Concerning Interpretation in Historiography", *Scandia* 2025:91:1, p. 125.

king of the Bulghārs.⁶ Officially appointed to read the caliph's letter to the Bulghār king, present him with gifts, and supervise the jurists and instructors,⁷ Ibn Faḍlān found himself compelled to assume additional responsibilities – such as basic instruction in the Islamic faith – because other members of the party, in particular the jurists and instructors, were too afraid to venture north.⁸ The Bulghār king, moreover, preferred to deal directly with Ibn Faḍlān rather than the other members of his party.⁹ The journey from Baghdad to the Volga river was a lengthy one – they reached the Bulghārs in 922 – and was fraught with dangers and complications. That we know about this journey at all is thanks entirely to Ibn Faḍlān's decision¹⁰ to keep a written record of his journey, likely, it seems, a personal rather than a professional choice. The result, a travel account detailing his outward journey to the Bulghārs, describes the journey and the peoples encountered along the way, among them the Ghuzziyah, the Bāshghird, and the Bulghārs. Ibn Faḍlān also describes the Rūs merchants he encountered along the Volga river, when they travelled into Bulghār territory to trade.¹¹ I discuss Ibn Faḍlān's understanding of the Rūs below.

Ibn Faḍlān's travel account, which we typically understand as a *risāla* (letter) or *kitāb* (book) depending on the form in which it is accessed,¹² was likely not an official or state document, then, but nonetheless led a

6 Though for discussion of the idea that the embassy did not unfold under the direction of the caliph, see Luke Treadwell, "Who Compiled and Edited the Mashhad Miscellany?", *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 2020:28, p. 69.

7 Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, "Mission to the Volga", in Abū Zayd al-Sirāfi & Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Two Arabic Travel Books. Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga*, Tim Mackintosh-Smith & James E. Montgomery (eds.), trans. James Montgomery, New York, 2014, p. 191. Throughout this essay, I cite James Montgomery's 2014 translation because it is a facing Arabic-English translation. I use Montgomery's 2017 translation only where I cite from Yāqūt's quotations of Ibn Faḍlān.

8 Ibn Faḍlān 2014, p. 199.

9 Ibn Faḍlān 2014, p. 221.

10 On Ibn Faḍlān's account as some form of personal memoir rather than an official document, see James E. Montgomery, "Where Is the Real Ibn Fadlan? Editing and Translating the *Kitāb*", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age. Diplomacy and Islam in the World of Ibn Fadlan*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023, pp. 34–36; James E. Montgomery, "Introduction. Mission to the Volga", in Abū Zayd al-Sirāfi & Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Two Arabic Travel Books. Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga*, Tim Mackintosh-Smith & James E. Montgomery (eds.), New York 2014, p. 183; 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. Diplomacy and Islam in the World of Ibn Fadlan*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023, pp. 41–44.

11 Ibn Faḍlān 2014, p. 241.

12 Treadwell 2023.

rich afterlife as far as its Islamicate transmission is concerned. Though there is no indication that Ibn Faḍlān (or even his account) made it back to Baghdad,¹³ the account did make it into a tenth-century compilation, or *majmuʿa* (miscellany), of travel and geographical writings.¹⁴ This compendium survives in a thirteenth-century manuscript copy, Razavi MS 5229, located in Mashhad, Iran. As I discuss below, this manuscript, containing the fullest extant contiguous version of Ibn Faḍlān's eyewitness account, was identified in 1923.

The other forms by which aspects of Ibn Faḍlān's account were preserved – including those through which the text was studied prior to 1923 – consist of quotations and recognisable adaptations of aspects of Ibn Faḍlān. The most extensive form, which is both the earliest version to have been utilized by orientalist scholars and the version most heavily relied upon both before and alongside the Mashhad identification, is a series of quotations of Ibn Faḍlān's account preserved in Yāqūt al-Hamawī's *Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries). Yāqūt testified to the existence of multiple copies of the text, which he calls a *risāla* written by the *rasūl* (messenger) of al-Muqtadir.¹⁵ Yāqūt serves as a critical node in Ibn Faḍlān's transmission, ensuring his continued survival in subsequent geographical texts which made use of Yāqūt's overall work;¹⁶ if not for the appearance of Ibn Faḍlān in his *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, we would have far less textual material at our disposal.

Ibn Faḍlān is named, quoted (with or without attribution), or in some way recognisable in a number of additional texts. These include: Aḥmad al-Ṭūsī's 12th-century Persian *ʿAjāʾib-nāma*,¹⁷ Qazwīnī's 13th-century Arabic *ʿAjāʾib al-Makhlūqāt wa-Ḡharāʾib al-Mawjūdāt* and *Āthār al-Bilād*, a limited number of manuscript witnesses of Abū-l-Fidā Ibn al-Athīr's

13 Viacheslav S. Kuleshov, "Ibn Fadlan's Kitab. Text and Afterlife", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age. Diplomacy and Islam in the World of Ibn Fadlan*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023, p. 17.

14 Treadwell 2023; Treadwell 2020.

15 Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Mission to the Volga*, trans. James E. Montgomery, New York 2017, pp. 41–42.

16 Among these, we might count Qazwīnī, al-Ḥarrānī, Abū-l-Fidā Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn al-Wardī, al-Bakuwī, Maḥmūd al-Ḥaṭīb, and the *Tarīḥ-i Hind-i Garbī*. For discussion of most of these texts, see Tonicha M. Upham, "Ibn Faḍlān's Gigantic Afterlife. The Riverine and Textual Journey of a Giant of Gog and Magog", in *Liv, reise og erindring. Festschrift til Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir*, Pernille Hermann, Nina Javette Koefoed, Rósa Magnúsdóttir & Hrefna Róbertsdóttir (eds.), Copenhagen 2025a.

17 As Kyrychenko notes, A.P. Kovalevskii presents Ṭūsī as Najīb Hamadānī, but Anglophone scholarship tends to prefer Ṭūsī. Kyrychenko 2025, p. 126; James E. McKeithen, "The Risalah of Ibn Fadlan. An Annotated Translation with Introduction", PhD thesis, Indiana University 1979, p. 21 n. 44; Treadwell 2023, pp. 47–48.

13th-century Arabic *Tuhfat al-ʿAjāʾib*,¹⁸ al-Harrānī's 14th-century Arabic *Jāmi' al-Funūn wa-Salwat al-Mahzūn*, Ibn al-Wardī's 14th-century Arabic *Kharīdat al-ʿAjāʾib wa-Farīdat al-Gharāʾib* and at least one of its Ottoman Turkish translations, Maḥmūd al-Haṭīb's 15th-century *ʿAcaʾib el-Mahlukat*, al-Bakuwī's 14th or 15th-century Arabic *Talkhīs al-Āthār*, Ibn Iyās' 16th-century Arabic *Nashq al-Azhār fī ʿAjāʾib al-Aqtār*, the 16th-century Ottoman Turkish *Tarih-i Hind-i Garbi veya Hadis-i Nev*, Amīn Rāzī's 16th-century Persian *Haft Iqlīm*, Ghanāʾī's 17th-century Persian *Maḥabbat-nāma*, and Maḥmūd ibn Valī's 17th-century Persian *Baḥr al-Asrār fī Manāqib al-Akhyār*.¹⁹

Not all afterlives of Ibn Faḍlān are created equal, and as such they have been subject to varying levels of engagement. Besides Yāqūt and Mashhad, the most critical forms of Ibn Faḍlān – and in particular those utilised in the two 1939 studies and translations of Ibn Faḍlān (discussed below) – are Aḥmad al-Ṭūsī, Qazwīnī, and Amīn Rāzī, whose Persian adaptation of Ibn Faḍlān's Rūs account provides additional interpretative fodder for Norse readings of the Rūs funerary ritual.²⁰ It is important to emphasise the full extent of Ibn Faḍlān's transmission, however, particularly in order to underscore the scope of developments in our own understandings of Ibn Faḍlān's textual transmission since the 1939 and 1956 studies discussed below.

To hone in on the Rūs in this account, Ibn Faḍlān calls the merchants he encounters *Rūsiyyah*, and explains that they had travelled by boat in order to trade.²¹ He does not offer a geographical location for the Rūs at home, or interrogate their identity, but he does supply rich detail on topics such as their trade activities and participation in human trafficking networks, their dress and attire, and in particular their funerary practices. Many of the topics covered in his description of the Rūs echo his earlier observational priorities over the course of his journey, but are supplemented by happen-

18 I am currently preparing a translation and study of this text.

19 Kuleshov 2023, pp. 18–19; Treadwell 2023, pp. 47–48; Thorir Jonsson Hraundal, “The Rus in Arabic Sources. Cultural Contacts and Identity”, PhD thesis, The University of Bergen 2013, p. 180; Upham 2025a; Tonicha M. Upham, “Rūs Gender in Islamicate Sources. The Transmission of Geographical and Historical Ideas on the North in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish between the Third and Eleventh Centuries AH/Ninth and Seventeenth Centuries AD”, PhD thesis, Aarhus Universitet 2023, pp. 264–291; Young-Jin Ahn & Zuhridin Juraev, “Mahmud ibn Vali and the Persianate Geography of Early Modern Eurasia”, *The Seventeenth Century* 2025:40:4.

20 Neil Price, “Ibn Fadlan and the Rituals of the Rus. Vikings on the Volga?”, in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age. Diplomacy and Islam in the World of Ibn Fadlan*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023; Tonicha M. Upham, “Keeping Abreast of Foreign Fashions. Rationalizing Rūs Brooches in a Sixteenth-Century Persian Version of Ibn Faḍlān's Risala”, *Medieval Encounters* 2022:28:1; Tonicha M. Upham, *Death Rituals. The Rūs and 'Vikings' in Arabic and Persian*, Cambridge 2025b, pp. 48–50.

21 Ibn Faḍlān 2014, p. 241.

stance; Ibn Faḍlān could verify the information he had gathered on Rūs funerary practices because he had the opportunity to observe the tenth and final day of a lavish funeral for an important Rūs man.²²

While scholars have spilled extensive ink discussing the Scandinavian, Slavic, and Turkic cultural parallels exhibited in this account,²³ for Ibn Faḍlān the Rūs were simply *Rūsiyyah*. The two terms were largely interchangeable: in the thirteenth century, Yāqūt prefaces his quotation of Ibn Faḍlān's *Rūsiyyah* by explaining that the Rūs (the term he uses for this section's heading in his encyclopaedia) are known as *Rūs*, or alternatively simply *Rus* with a short vowel.²⁴ Ibn Faḍlān does not present the Rūs as Ṣaqāliba, a term often translated (imperfectly) as "Slav,"²⁵ which was a multivalent term in use as a very broad ethnonym and a term which could denote a slave from the north.²⁶ He does, however, frequently call the king of the Bulghār "king of the Ṣaqāliba." Rachel Schine suggests that this is a form of "exonymic slippage" betraying Ibn Faḍlān's attitudes about the north,²⁷ namely a sense that the distinctions of ethnyonyms were not entirely necessary. Though other Arabic sources on the Rūs suggest an association with or belonging to the Ṣaqāliba, Ibn Faḍlān is resolute in calling them simply *Rūsiyyah*.

The European Discovery of Ibn Faḍlān

As established, Ibn Faḍlān's Islamicate afterlife ranged as late as the seventeenth century. The history of European and orientalist engagements with Ibn Faḍlān begins in the early nineteenth century. While Kyrychenko points briefly to a handful of historiographical milestones in the study of Ibn Faḍlān, there are some important distinctions to be made in outlining the pre-1923 scholarship on Ibn Faḍlān and some of the overarching influences governing its direction.

22 Ibn Faḍlān 2014, p. 245.

23 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*, Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt & Rasmus Trandum Kristensen (eds.), Turnhout 2007; Thorir Jonsson Hraundal, "Identities, Ethnicities, Cultures. Ibn Fadlan and the Rus on the Middle Volga", in *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age. Diplomacy and Islam in the World of Ibn Fadlan*, Jonathan Shepard & Luke Treadwell (eds.), London 2023; Price 2023.

24 Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch. Aus den Handschriften zu Berlin, St. Petersburg, Paris, London und Oxford*, Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (ed.), vol. 2, Leipzig 1867, p. 834.

25 Hraundal 2013, p. 65.

26 Rachel Schine, "Translating Race in the Islamic Studies Classroom", *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 2022:30, pp. 342–343.

27 Schine 2022, p. 342.

In 1814, Danish orientalist Jens Lassen Rasmussen published a lengthy essay, *Om Arabernes og Persernes Handel og Bekjendtskab med Rusland og Skandinavien i Middelalderen* [On the Arabs' and Persians' trade with and knowledge of Russia and Scandinavia in the Middle Ages]. The essay surveyed Arabic and Persian sources – both those already published and some accessible only in manuscripts – which discussed Russia and Scandinavia, and was submitted to *Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab's* 1814 essay competition.²⁸ Among the essay's major scholarly contributions was the very first presentation of Ibn Faḍlān in a European language.²⁹

This Danish introduction and translation was facilitated by a Danish-held manuscript copy of Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, which had been purchased in Constantinople in 1761 by Frederik Christian von Haven under the auspices of the Niehbuhr expedition.³⁰ The purchase – entirely facilitated by an unacknowledged Syrian intermediary named François Barout³¹ – occurred purely on the basis that von Haven knew Leiden held a copy of Yāqūt's geographical encyclopaedia.³² At this point in time, neither European orientalists nor Ottoman scholars were preoccupied with Yāqūt (or, by extension, Ibn Faḍlān);³³ this particular manuscript acquisition, and the work arising from it, occurred by chance rather than out of an awareness of its value.

Copenhagen Cod. Arab. 99, the first of a two-volume Ottoman-bound manuscript set containing Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, was an imperfect copy. It was incomplete, missing several letters of the alphabet; as a result, the only quotations of Ibn Faḍlān which this witness contains are found under the headings “Rūs” and “Itīl” (the Volga – this is Ibn Faḍlān's encounter with

28 Tonicha M. Upham, “‘This Awful and Distressing Circumstance’. Translating Ibn Faḍlān's ‘Vikings’ for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine”, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 2025c:154 (forthcoming), p. 226.

29 Rasmussen 1814, pp. 57–70.

30 Irmeli Perho, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts*, vol. 5.3, Copenhagen 2007, pp. 369–370; Frederik Christian von Haven, *NKS 133.2 Prof. von Havens Excerpter og Collectanea af arabiske og andre orientalske Skrifter; item hans Reisejournal paa den arabiske Reise*, Copenhagen 1760, fol. 552, Det Kgl. Bibliotek; Tonicha M. Upham, “A Throne for the Angel of Death? Alternate Manuscript Readings of Ibn Faḍlān's Risala as Conduits for Silenced Narratives of ‘Discovery’ and Female Agency”, forthcoming; Upham 2023, pp. 54–57.

31 Upham 2023, pp. 145–154; Upham forthcoming; Frederik Christian von Haven, *Min Sundheds Forliis: Frederik Christian von Havens Rejsejournal fra den arabiske Rejse 1760–1763*, Anne Haslund Hansen & Stig T. Rasmussen (eds.), Copenhagen 2005, p. 220.

32 von Haven 1760, fol. 552.

33 Upham 2023, pp. 52–54; Nadja Danilenko, *Picturing the Islamic World. The Story of al-Iṣṭakhri's Book of Routes and Realms*, Leiden 2021, p. 145; Marina Tolmacheva, “The Medieval Arabic Geographers and the Beginnings of Modern Orientalism”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1995:27:2, pp. 151–152.

a purported giant of Gog and Magog).³⁴ Even where quotations from the travel account are supplied, errors arise; Rasmussen described the manuscript as “skjønt skrevet, men defekt” [beautifully written, but defective],³⁵ and later found himself moved to annotate the manuscript in order to “correct” a missing sentence in the Rūs account.³⁶ But despite these flaws, Cod. Arab. 99 served the vital purpose of introducing Ibn Faḍlān to Europe.

Though introduced, the work was preliminary. Rasmussen was unable to offer contextual details on Ibn Faḍlān or Yāqūt, explaining that Yāqūt is not mentioned in Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque Orientale*,³⁷ then the standard orientalist reference tool.³⁸ He did not pursue the matter of Yāqūt’s identity and work further. Nor did Rasmussen engage analytically with the contents of Ibn Faḍlān’s account of the Rūs. He concludes his translation of the text by writing that interpretation should be left for the “nordiske Oldgrandskere” [Nordic antiquarians], though the Rūs clearly resembled Denmark’s forefathers in both religion and custom.³⁹

This is emblematic of Ibn Faḍlān’s arrival in Europe, in that his Rūs were couched in entirely Scandinavian terms against a backdrop of the emerging engagement with and development of a sense of a Viking past. This is evident not only in Rasmussen’s deferral of analytical comment, but also in his decision in 1825, when reworking this essay into Latin, to translate Ar. *al-jannah* [paradise; the garden] as Valhalla.⁴⁰ The reactions of *Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab*, who awarded Rasmussen a silver medal for his 1814 Danish essay, also testify to this. They particularly praise Rasmussen’s use of Islamicate source material to cast “enkelte Lysglimt” [individual glimmers of light] over “vor tidligere Histories Mørke” [our early history’s darkness], and single out Ibn Faḍlān’s funerary account, which they compare with Brynhildr’s funeral.⁴¹

From here, engagement with Ibn Faḍlān’s Rūs diverges. Rasmussen’s

34 Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Cod. Arab. 99. Muʿjam al-Buldān*, Copenhagen n.d., fols 65a–65b, 259a–262b, Det Kgl. Bibliotek.

35 Rasmussen 1814, p. 6; Frähn is less critical, noting simply that the copy is incomplete. Fraehn 1823, p. xlvii.

36 Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Cod. Arab. 99*, n.d., fol. 260b; Upham forthcoming.

37 Rasmussen 1814, p. 6.

38 Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV’s France*, Oxford 2009, pp. 168–169.

39 Rasmussen 1814, p. 70.

40 Jens Lassen [as Janus Lassen] Rasmussen, *De Arabum Persarumqve Commercio cum Russia et Scandinavia Medio Ævo, Proludendo Scripsit D. Janus Lassen Rasmussen*, Copenhagen 1825, p. 43; Upham 2025c, p. 227.

41 Ørsted 1816, p. 17.

essay was translated into Swedish, English,⁴² and from English into French.⁴³ These translations of translations (something of a perennial problem in the study of Ibn Faḍlān) constituted the key ways by which scholars of the Viking world understood and accessed Ibn Faḍlān until 1869 and 1871, when Danish orientalist Christopher Andreas Holmboe produced a fresh translation of Cod. Arab. 99 to correct Rasmussen's errors. Joseph Anderson then translated the essay into English.⁴⁴ This spate of scholarship was distinctly Viking in focus, spurred on by developments in Viking burial archaeology and supplemented by British imperial writings on Hindu *satī*.⁴⁵

A more Arabic-focused endeavour emerged in St. Petersburg. Sergei Uvarov, working from various educational and ministerial positions, was in active pursuit of a European Enlightenment for Russia.⁴⁶ Seeking to establish St. Petersburg as a strong academic centre for Oriental Studies, Uvarov hired his friend, German orientalist Christian Martin Frähn, for St. Petersburg's Academy of Science's newly-founded Asiatic Museum. It was a welcome career opportunity after the humiliation of ten unsuccessful years of teaching at Kazan University,⁴⁷ and provided ample work for Frähn on account of Uvarov's energetic manuscript acquisition efforts as he sought to expand Peter the Great's *Kunstskammer* and build a strong collection in St.

42 On which see Upham 2025c.

43 This latter endeavour involved critical commentary from French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy, which offered somewhat more analytical substance. Jens Lassen Rasmussen, *Om Arabernes og Persernes Bekantskap och Handel under Medeltiden med Rusland och Skandinavien, af Dr J. L. Rasmussen*, trans. J. Adlerbeth, Stockholm 1817; Jens Lassen Rasmussen, "An Historical and Geographical Essay on the Trade and Communication of the Arabians and Persians with Russia and Scandinavia, during the Middle Ages", trans. Alexander Nicoll, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1818–1819:4; the French begins in Jens Lassen Rasmussen, "Essai Historique et Géographique sur le Commerce et les Relations des Arabes et des Persans avec la Russie et la Scandinavia, durant le Moyen Âge, par M. Rasmussen", Silvestre de Sacy (ed.), *Journal Asiatique* 1824:V:10.

44 C. A. Holmboe, "Ibn-Fozlān, Om nordiske Begravelses-Skikke, fra det Arabiske oversat og med Anmerkninger oplyst af C. A. Holmboe", *Forhandlinger Videnskabs-Selskabet i Christiania* 1869; Joseph Anderson, "Description by Ahmed Ibn-Fozlan (an Eye-Witness) of the Ceremonies Attending the Incremation of the Dead Body of a Norse Chief, Written in the Early Part of the Tenth Century. Translated from Holmboe's Danish Version of the Arabic Original, with Notes on the Origin of Cremation, and Its Continuance", *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 1871:9.

45 Upham 2025c, p. 232; Tonicla Upham, "Rus Women in Islamicate Geography? Approaching a Study of Gender", in *The Making of the Eastern Vikings. Rus' and Varangians in the Middle Ages*, Sverrir Jakobsson, Thorir Jonsson Hraundal & Daria Segal (eds.), Turnhout 2024, p. 28; Holmboe 1869, p. 276 n. 5; Anderson 1871, pp. 524–525.

46 Cynthia H. Whittaker, "The Impact of the Oriental Renaissance in Russia. The Case of Sergej Uvarov", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 1978:26:4.

47 Kalpana Sahni, *Crucifying the Orient. Russian Orientalism and the Colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia*, Bangkok 1997, pp. 19–20; Upham 2023, pp. 58–61.

Petersburg.⁴⁸ In particular, between 1819 and 1825 Uvarov acquired some 700 manuscripts from Jean Baptiste Louis Jacques Rousseau, who had formerly been French consul in Aleppo, Tripoli, and Baghdad.⁴⁹ Too expensive for the French government to afford, the first batch of 500 manuscripts from Rousseau, which included copies of *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, cost 36,000 francs.⁵⁰ Out of a desire for Russia to be a cutting edge academic centre, Ibn Faḍlān arrived in St. Petersburg in 1819.

Frähn's access to Yāqūt's encyclopaedia, coming via a more complete textual witness than Rasmussen had access to in Copenhagen, gave him much more of Ibn Faḍlān's account to work with. In conjunction with Oxford copies of *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, which had been gathering dust in the Bodleian for a century prior to this,⁵¹ Frähn used these manuscripts to embark on a far more extensive study of Ibn Faḍlān. This study focused more heavily on the context of Ibn Faḍlān against other Arabic material than it did on compiling sources for a Scandinavian past. Frähn actually conducted his initial identification of Ibn Faḍlān independently of Rasmussen's work (and his first rough translation of Ibn Faḍlān's *Rūs* was consequently published in Russian without his knowledge or permission in 1819),⁵² but once he began working on Ibn Faḍlān's *Rūs* in detail, he engaged thoroughly with the Danish orientalist's work; the pair even corresponded about the text.⁵³ Frähn's efforts yielded a series of publications, and his work with Ibn Faḍlān's *Rūs* entailed an Arabic edition and German translation, alongside extensive notes.⁵⁴ This scholarship, predicated on what scholars agreed was a better copy of *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, enabled a stronger study of Ibn Faḍlān, and enabled some alterations and additions to the text as it was known via Yāqūt (namely the error "corrected" by Rasmussen in the margin of Cod. Arab. 99).⁵⁵ This is important to consider, since it means that scholars working with the various translations of Rasmussen's Danish

48 Whittaker 1978, p. 518.

49 Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics. How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*, Princeton 2020, p. 14; Ignatii Iul'ianovich Kratchkovsky, *Among Arabic Manuscripts. Memories of Libraries and Men*, trans. Tatiana Minorsky, Leiden 1953, pp. 75–76; Whittaker 1978, p. 518; Upham 2023, pp. 61–62; Fraehn 1823, p. xxxviii.

50 Henri Dehérain, "Le Consul Orientaliste Joseph Rousseau (1780–1831), Deuxième Article", *Journal des Savants*, 1936:1, p. 30.

51 Alasdair Watson, "In Some Dark Corner of the Library...: The 'Mystery' of the Marsh Manuscripts", *The Bodleian Library Record* 2014:27:2.

52 Fraehn 2023, pp. lxv–lxvi n.

53 Upham 2023, p. 63.

54 Fraehn 1823.

55 Upham forthcoming; Upham 2023, pp. 64–70.

translation were working with different forms of the text than were scholars who worked with Frähn's translation (or translations thereof). This leads to considerable differences in the basic text despite Yāqūt being a shared point of origin, even before issues such as nineteenth-century sensibilities around descriptions of Rūs sexual activity are taken into account as factors affecting the text's accessibility in translation.⁵⁶

Another important pre-1923 milestone was the creation of a full Arabic edition of Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-Buldān* by German orientalist Ferdinand Wüstenfeld between 1866 and 1872.⁵⁷ A significant development because it presented the text as a whole, and made access to all of this material easier,⁵⁸ Wüstenfeld also synthesised Yāqūt's text using a much wider range of manuscripts. He had not only the St. Petersburg and Oxford copies at his disposal, but Berlin, Paris, and London too (Copenhagen was disregarded). In this, he was aided by the European acquisition of manuscripts over the course of the nineteenth century – and in the case of the Paris manuscripts, the creation of manuscript copies which could then be utilised in such a study.⁵⁹ The nineteenth-century landscape in which Ibn Faḍlān (via Yāqūt) was studied, translated, and transmitted was a dynamic one.

To the summary of Russian and Ukrainian engagements with Ibn Faḍlān which Kyrychenko was better-placed than I am to supply, we might also consider a further use of nineteenth-century Russian translations of the travel account. As Ibn Faḍlān made his way into German and Russian, he began to emerge as a point of interest for Bulghar, Bashkir, and Tatar history-writers in the Volga-Urals, who made use of Ibn Faḍlān in particular for his provision of an Islamic conversion date and narrative – this was the case, for example, with Bashkir writer Muḥammad 'Alī b. Salīḥ al-Chōqorī al-Bulghārī's late nineteenth-century historical commentary *Tavārīx-i Bulghārīya yākī Taqrīb-i Ġārī*.⁶⁰ Often drawing on Russian and German scholarship and translations,⁶¹ Ibn Faḍlān accordingly found scholarly use

⁵⁶ Upham 2023, pp. 132–141.

⁵⁷ Publication occurred over six volumes, the second of which contains Ibn Faḍlān's Rūs. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī 1867.

⁵⁸ McKeithen 1979, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Upham 2023, p. 53.

⁶⁰ Allen J. Frank, *Islamic Historiography and 'Bulghar' Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia*, Leiden 1998, pp. 139–145; Allen J. Frank, "The Development of Regional Islamic Identity in Imperial Russia. Two Commentaries on the Tavārīx-i Bulghārīya of Husāmaddin al-Muslimī", in *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the early 20th Centuries*, Michael Kemper, Anke von Kügelgen & Dmitriy Yermakov (eds.), vol. 1, Berlin 1996, pp. 123–125; Michael Kemper, *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baschkirien, 1789–1889*, Berlin 1998, pp. 368–392.

⁶¹ Frank 1998, p. 160.

as an historical authority in work on the conversion of the Bulgars and, especially via the works of Tatar historian Shihāb ad-Dīn al-Marjānī, served as a tool for justifying ethnic stereotypes and divisions which sought to deride the Bashkirs.⁶² As Kyrychenko notes, Russian translations of Ibn Faḍlān (particularly Abraham Harkavy's in 1870) constituted an important vehicle for conveying Ibn Faḍlān to Russian and Ukrainian scholars,⁶³ but also moved beyond this to additional areas in which the text held a variety of local nationalist resonances.

The Mashhad Identification

Following 1923, the scholarly landscape for Ibn Faḍlān was dramatically altered. Here, it is helpful to supply greater detail than Kyrychenko provides, in order to explore the publication of various translations and studies of the Mashhad compendium's Ibn Faḍlān and to further elucidate the political ramifications of aspects of this historiography.

Razavi MS 5229, the *majmu'a* or miscellany mentioned above, was housed in the library of the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Iran, and is a thirteenth-century copy of a tenth-century compendium containing four geographical and eyewitness texts. It was identified by Bashkir politician and scholar Ahmet Zeki Validi Togan, who passed through Mashhad (under great suspicion from various military and intelligence agents)⁶⁴ during spring 1923 after fleeing Russia when his involvement in Bashkir autonomous governance collapsed. Clichés abound that Togan stumbled entirely accidentally upon the Mashhad compendium because, as a Muslim, he had sought refuge inside the shrine. Certainly, at this time non-Muslims did not enjoy access to the site;⁶⁵ Russian orientalist Vladimir Ivanow had bitterly reflected as much when publishing a partial catalogue of manuscripts held by the shrine, concluding that the library's holdings were disappointing. Unbeknownst to Ivanow, the list of manuscripts he published included Razavi MS 5229.⁶⁶

However, while Togan secured entry where his non-Muslim colleagues could not, access to the library was neither easy nor coincidental. Availing himself of various tours and library access permissions on his arrival in

62 Frank 1998, pp. 170–171; Kemper 1998, pp. 460–461; Upham 2023, pp. 122–126.

63 Kyrychenko 2025, pp. 126–127.

64 Glenda A. Fraser, "Haji Sami and the Turkestan Federation, 1922–3", *Asian Affairs* 1987:18:1, pp. 16–17.

65 Upham 2023, pp. 80–87.

66 W. Ivanow, "A Notice on the Library Attached to the Shrine of Imam Reza at Meshed", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1920:52:4, p. 553.

Mashhad⁶⁷ – likely as much out of genuine academic interest as to dispel the fears of British, Russian, and Turkish agents who feared what a pan-Turanian nationalist like Togan might be plotting – Togan found it necessary to write multiple letters to Reza Shah Pahlavi, then Persian Minister of War, in order to request support in accessing the Imam Reza library.⁶⁸ Further restricted by reduced opening hours during Nowruz, Togan ultimately gained access to the library following support from Turkish consul Sami Bey.⁶⁹ Finally, he was able to encounter the Mashhad compendium, though having drawn the attention of the librarians to the manuscript's importance, he swiftly encountered barriers to his own access.⁷⁰ When the British smuggled Togan out of Mashhad using Afghan postal couriers,⁷¹ he carried with him not photographs of the manuscript (he had no access to a camera) or even the manuscript itself, which the librarians had offered to sell to him, but instead a handwritten copy of the manuscript which he had worked through the night to create.⁷² He would have a fight on his hands to gain access to a photocopy of the manuscript.

The Mashhad identification was significant; in the early twentieth century, many scholars considered scholarship on Ibn Faḍlān to have reached saturation point, in that little more could be done with the present forms (Yāqūt) in which the text survived.⁷³ Togan's identification offered substantial new material, and the text in contiguous form (though still incomplete, and some areas still needed to be supplemented or corrected from Yāqūt). As such, the production of translations swiftly became not only an academic issue but a political one.

Togan translated Ibn Faḍlān for his PhD thesis in Vienna, and continued his work at Bonn, working in both cases to translate and study the travel account. Initially reliant on his own handwritten notes, Togan was finally able to access a photocopy of the manuscript in around 1935, when German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld, heavily involved in Iranian cultural heritage,

67 Togan 2012, p. 373.

68 Togan 2012, p. 374.

69 Marsil N. Farkhshatov, "Ahmet-Zeki Validi Togan and the Travel Accounts of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan", *St Petersburg Annual of Asian and African Studies* 2012:1, p. 15; Togan 2012, p. 378.

70 Farkhshatov 2012, pp. 15–16.

71 Fraser 1987, pp. 17–18; Togan 2012, p. 383.

72 Togan 2012, p. 378.

73 McKeithen 1979, p. 10.

dispatched a photocopy to Berlin.⁷⁴ Togan made use of this photocopy⁷⁵ while working on his translation, which also integrated forms of Ibn Faḍlān besides the Mashhad compendium. Correspondence indicates that he considered a range of potential target languages and publishers in his efforts to secure an outlet for Ibn Faḍlān, and that he was greatly concerned that someone might beat him to the publication of his own discovery.⁷⁶

Togan's fears were not unfounded. In 1935, a photocopy of the Mashhad compendium was presented as some form of diplomatic gift to the USSR by the Iranian government, on the occasion of the Third International Congress and Exhibition of Iranian Art and Archaeology in Leningrad.⁷⁷ The gifting of manuscripts was a not-uncommon diplomatic strategy.⁷⁸ Work with these photocopies in Leningrad fell to a promising scholar from Kharkiv, Andreii Petrovich Kovalevskii, who worked under the direction of Ignatii Krachkovskii at the Institute for Oriental Studies. Kovalevskii's Russian translation was mostly completed by 1937, and that year was presented to the Second Session of the Association of Soviet Arabists.⁷⁹ In 1938, however, before the work could be published, Kovalevskii was arrested under Article 58 of the Soviet Criminal Code on the grounds of "anti-Soviet activities" – likely, Mikail Rodionov says, "clue to his Ukrainian connections."⁸⁰ Kovalevskii remained in the Gulag until 1944, but his translation was published in 1939 despite his political persecution.

The 1939 Russian translation emerged, without Kovalevskii's name attached, because its mere publication months ahead of Togan's German translation⁸¹ served to undercut an enemy of the Soviet people, and estab-

74 Károly Czeglédý, "Zur Meschheder Handschrift von Ibn Fadlāns Reisebericht", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 1951:1:2/3, p. 218 n. 6; Upham 2023, pp. 93–97.

75 This was one of three photocopies: the third made it to Hungary during the 1930s at the instigation of Hungarian orientalist Lajos Ligeti. The second is discussed below. Czeglédý 1951, p. 218; McKeithen 1979, p. 18 n. 39.

76 Farkhshatov 2012.

77 Kuleshov 2023, pp. 19–20; Kyrychenko 2025, p. 127; Anna Kmietowicz, Franciszek Kmietowicz & Tadeusz Lewicki, *Źródła Arabskie Do Dziejów Słowiańszczyzny*, vol. 3, Wrocław 1985, p. 15.

78 Alfrid K. Bustanov, "Settling the Past. Soviet Oriental Projects in Leningrad and Alma-Ata", PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam 2013, pp. 83–84; Upham 2023, pp. 95–96.

79 Ines Axelrod-Rubin, "The Author Is Not Mentioned", *The Ukrainian Quarterly: A Journal of East European and Asian Affairs* 1985:16:3/4, pp. 216–218.

80 Mikhail Rodionov, "Profiles under Pressure. Orientalists in Petrograd/Leningrad, 1918–1956", in *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, Michael Kemper & Stephan Conermann (eds.), London 2011, pp. 54–55.

81 Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Ibn Faḍlān's Reisebericht*, A. Zeki Validi Togan (ed.), Leipzig 1939.

lished “Soviet priority” in Arabic studies.⁸² This argument, forwarded by Krachkovskii (who penned an introduction to the text and was subsequently regularly credited as the author of the 1939 study), was made possible because Krachkovskii corresponded with Togan and therefore knew what progress he had made in his own translation.⁸³ Togan, who had once been warned not to let Ibn Faḍlān “fall into the hands of the Russians” lest they “fraudulently alter” it,⁸⁴ resented this “appropriation” of his scholarship which did not acknowledge his work.⁸⁵ Neither Kovalevskii nor Krachkovskii publicly acknowledged the former’s imprisonment in the Gulag, and in 1956 when Kovalevskii published a fresh edition and study of Ibn Faḍlān, he similarly did not acknowledge his prior work on the subject.⁸⁶

I outline this historiography in greater detail here because it is integral to the fact that Kovalevskii’s work was published at all. Being the work of a persecuted Ukrainian scholar, this scholarship is unlikely to have emerged without the threat of Togan’s academic prestige.⁸⁷ To follow Kyrychenko’s stance that contemporary politics and culture shape understandings of historical texts, a thorough consideration of the political intricacies of Ibn Faḍlān is important. For the sake of space and scope I leave this outline of Ibn Faḍlān’s historiography here, before Sāmī al-Dahhān’s 1959 Arabic edition of the text and later twentieth-century scholarship, but note that the modern historiography of this text is also rich and complex.

The Rūs as Severians?

As has hopefully been made clear, engagement with Ibn Faḍlān spans many languages, fields, and arenas, and so there is a great deal of historiography to deal with. As such, it is useful to read Kyrychenko’s summary of Ukrainian arguments that the Rūs might have been Slavic Severians, since this scholarship has unfolded in Russian and Ukrainian and is thus difficult to access for scholars not versed in these languages. However, Kyrychenko does not engage critically with the arguments summarised, and moreover employs a

82 Axelrod-Rubin 1985, p. 217; Kuleshov 2023, p. 20; Upham 2023, pp. 101–105.

83 Farkhshatov 2012.

84 Togan 2012, p. 441.

85 Zamakhsharī Maḥmūd, *Horezmce tercūmeli Muqaddimat al-adab/Khorezmian Glossary of the Muqaddimat al-Adab*, Ahmed Zeki Velidi Togan (ed.), Istanbul 1951, pp. 5–6 n. 4.

86 Michael Kemper, “Introduction”, in Ignatii Iul’ianovich Kratchkovsky, *Among Arabic Manuscripts. Memories of Libraries and Men*, trans. Tatiana Minorsky, 2nd ed., Leiden 2016, pp. 13–14; Axelrod-Rubin 1985, p. 221.

87 Itself made more dubious by the fact that the German publication occurred after Togan and the Bonn orientalist who aided him, Paul Kahle, had both felt it prudent to flee Nazi Germany; both translations were only barely published.

selective approach to translations of the text, so it is important to address some key issues here. To forward some initial, critical points, we might consider that any work undertaken by Ukrainian and Russian scholars on the basis of Rasmussen's Danish translation relied, as established, on what Arabist scholars considered to be an inferior manuscript witness (not to mention that this access to Ibn Faḍlān likely occurred through a convoluted system of translations from Arabic into Russian), without extensive commentary on the Arabic, nor any provision of the Arabic text itself.

Kyrychenko does not offer considerable detail on precisely who the Severians were, indicating that they were a Slavic tribe who in the tenth century "inhabited lands on the left bank of the Dnipro River".⁸⁸ Turning to the Laurentian codex of *Povest' vremennykh let* (PVL), we might consider that the Severians had previously paid tribute to the Khazars, until they were conquered by prince Oleg in the late ninth century.⁸⁹ Kyrychenko outlines a variety of arguments, now discredited, for the Severian identity of Ibn Faḍlān's Volga-traversing Rūs.⁹⁰ These include similarities between Ibn Faḍlān's Rūs funeral and some generalisations in PVL about the funerary customs of pagan tribes,⁹¹ bolstered by prior theories as to the Severian character of burial mounds in Chernihiv;⁹² arguments as to the type of axe carried by the Rūs; descriptions of their swords; and the use of fur pelts as currency. He suggests that this scholarship allowed Ukrainian researchers to find a "positive image of their [Severian] ancestors."⁹³

It is not especially helpful to engage in detail with the bulk of these claims; while it is interesting to encounter these arguments (though it would also have been useful to understand if and how they have subsequently been countered or abandoned in Ukrainian and Russian scholarship), and to see how Ibn Faḍlān was integrated into various strands of scholarship on the Severians, the weakness of these arguments about a Rūs-Severian connection is clear, and typically seems to rely on an overreading of small, generalised extracts from PVL. In the case of some claims, however, specific methodological and interpretative corrections must be offered.

88 Kyrychenko 2025, p. 125.

89 Samuel Hazard Cross & Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans., *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian Text*, Cambridge, MA 1953, pp. 59–61.

90 Kyrychenko 2025, pp. 142–143.

91 Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953, pp. 56–57.

92 Władysław Duczko, *Viking Rus. Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*, Leiden 2004, p. 241.

93 Kyrychenko 2025, p. 142.

The Pitfalls of Ibn Faḍlān in Translation

The study of the Rūs brings with it various methodological issues, not least of which is the difficulty of wielding a vast number of sources in a range of languages. As Omeljan Pritsak writes on the study of the Rūs: “a chrestomathic knowledge of passages – very often derived only from translations (especially true in regard to the Scandinavian and Muslim sources) – gradually came to dominate the scholarly field.”⁹⁴ This neatly encapsulates a major methodological issue with the study of Ibn Faḍlān: its tendency to occur in excerpted form, and in translation. I therefore survey some issues which arise in Kyrychenko’s essay here in order to offer some important comments.

To begin with a lesser issue presented through Kyrychenko’s summary of Ukrainian historiography, we encounter the argument that the slave who is ritually assaulted and killed during the Rūs funerary ritual is looking not over a doorframe into the afterlife,⁹⁵ but rather is looking into a milk pail which, per Severian interpretations, serves as a symbolic well for a travelling band of Severians.⁹⁶ The argument, Kyrychenko explains, arises as a result of Rasmussen’s Danish translation; subsequent translations understand the object over which the sacrificial victim looks as a doorframe.

Kyrychenko frames the interpretative variations between translations discussed throughout his essay as reflective of “the goals of the interpreters and their affiliation with a specific ethnocultural or political environment”, enabling a potentially dangerous “plasticity of historical sources in the skilled hands of an interpreter.”⁹⁷ But what happens if we interrogate the difference between a milk pail and a doorframe? The issue at play here could potentially have arisen in part from what at first glance appears to be a stray diacritic in the Copenhagen manuscript, which may have led Rasmussen to read *milban al-bāb* rather than *malban al-bāb*, and to supply a different translation. It is in fact a letter *kāf* on the line below, but an eyeslip could have led Rasmussen to conclude that it indicated a *kasrah* in the word *m.l.b.*⁹⁸

Given the lack of orientalist scholarship on which to pin his interpretation of milk pail versus doorframe, there was little for Rasmussen to go on here. Subsequent scholars, starting with Frähn and his enhanced manuscript access, engaged in closer linguistic investigation of this issue

94 Omeljan Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus'. Old Scandinavian Sources Other than the Sagas*, vol. 1, Harvard 1981, p. xvii.

95 Ibn Faḍlān 2014, p. 249.

96 Kyrychenko 2025, p. 136.

97 Kyrychenko 2025, p. 126.

98 Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Cod. Arab.* 99, n.d., fol. 261a.

in order to reach conclusions relating to some form of gate or doorframe,⁹⁹ and this in turn provided something for later scholars to make use of. Following Frähn's publication, Rasmussen chose to defend the notion that the object is a well rather than a doorframe, using Scandinavian and Germanic parallels rather than Arabic linguistics to insist on this interpretation.¹⁰⁰ In his Danish translation, he offers no commentary explaining this choice.¹⁰¹

Kyrychenko points out that Rasmussen's milk pail did not see correction in the English translation, but this is because the English translator only had access to Rasmussen's Danish. It is helpful to see how this mistranslation in Danish aided in Severian interpretations, but in the absence of critical commentary in Rasmussen's 1814 translation, it does not appear that there was anything loaded or particularly politicised behind the initial decision to translate this term as "milk pail." Without considering that Rasmussen based his translation on a manuscript which was not subsequently employed for an in-depth Arabist study of the text, however, and without considering the wholly different scholarly and interpretative context in which Rasmussen was working, it is easy to see how this translation, so open to Severian interpretation, might be considered a deliberate and targeted interpretative choice.

More urgently, however, ideas about the funeral's sacrificial victim should be addressed, especially given how dramatically this discussion is hindered by the absence of the Arabic. The enslaved sacrificial victim of Ibn Faḍlān's account is, like the girls for sale by the Rūs merchants, a *jāriya* (pl. *jawāri*).¹⁰² This is, to be sure, a complex term, in that it can refer simply to a young woman as opposed to an enslaved one. This has led to translations which insist that the sacrificial victim is simply a "girl" or a "maiden", minimising the grim realities of her multiple assault and brutal murder at the hands of her traffickers. But to consider the frequency with which the term is used across the Middle Ages and a range of literary contexts to denote a female slave,¹⁰³ including within many Arabic sources on the Rūs, makes clear that the term here (especially in the context of a description of a band of

99 Frähn 1823, p. 124; Ibn Faḍlān 1939, p. 93; McKeithen 1979, p. 143 n. 475.

100 Rasmussen 1825, pp. 411–442.

101 Rasmussen 1814, p. 66.

102 Montgomery 2014, p. 246.

103 Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise. The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500*, Philadelphia 2019, pp. 14–15; Shaun Marmon, "Intersections of Gender, Sex, and Slavery. Female Sexual Slavery", in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Craig Perry, David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman & David Richardson (eds.), vol. 2: AD 500–AD 1420, Cambridge 2021, p. 187; Pernilla Myrne, "Slaves for Pleasure in Arabic Sex and Slave Purchase Manuals from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries", *Journal of Global Slavery* 2019:4, p. 206 n. 42; Lamia Balafrej, "Instrumental Jawāri. On Gender,

human traffickers) refers unequivocally to an enslaved girl.¹⁰⁴ Kyrychenko repeatedly signals that she is only considered a slave “in James Montgomery’s interpretation” (and here “interpretation” conveys an interesting aura of implied bias), while simultaneously maintaining that she is simply a “girl” “who belonged to the deceased,”¹⁰⁵ creating a confused tension in the sacrificial victim’s identity. While Kyrychenko concedes that most interpreters do understand the sacrificial victim as a slave, particular weight is lent to Kovalevskii’s refusal to consider her a slave, an argument which is somewhat more heavily predicated on social interpretations of aspects of the ritual than it is on the wider context of linguistic usages of the term *jāriya*.¹⁰⁶

This historiographical methodology – the presentation and comparison of selected translational choices from across the past 200 years – finds itself unable to check or corroborate the Arabic. Instead, it blends a comparison of translational choices (themselves based in part on social attitudes towards both women and slavery at various points in Ibn Faḍlān’s translation history by predominantly male translators and scholars, in part on the state of the field as regards scholarship on slavery in the Islamic world, and in part on the fact that the intricacies of this word were not of interest to earlier translators) with an investigation of broader arguments which relate to Severian or Scandinavian interpretations of the Rūs. Neither “girl” nor “slave” is, strictly speaking, incorrect, in that *jāriya*, devoid of context, could denote either. To establish this, however, we require the Arabic, and also a closer awareness of how different editions and translations operate with regard to this issue. In the nineteenth century, for instance, the majority of Danish and English translations of Ibn Faḍlān offered a heavily censored view of the sacrificial slave girl, because they had omitted the sexually-explicit aspects of the text which they considered unfit for publication.¹⁰⁷ As such, reflections of the sacrificial victim’s identity in these early phases of scholarship were either greatly sanitised or removed outright. A consideration of tendencies to translate *jāriya* as “girl” or “slave” in Ibn Faḍlān must consider these factors. Amid a glut of translations, retranslations, and translations of translations, we sometimes risk losing sight of the text itself.

Slavery, and Technology in Medieval Arabic Sources”, *Al-Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 2023:31, p. 96; Upham 2024, pp. 29–31.

¹⁰⁴ Upham 2025b, pp. 27–31.

¹⁰⁵ Kyrychenko 2025, p. 129.

¹⁰⁶ Kyrychenko 2025, p. 135.

¹⁰⁷ Upham 2023, pp. 132–140.

Finding and Interpreting Ibn Faḍlān's Rūs

The historiographical backgrounds presented in this essay are by necessity limited, and cover only a small aspect of the major developments in the study of Ibn Faḍlān during the previous two centuries. It is my hope that they serve to enhance and clarify some of the material presented by Kyrychenko, and to ground some of the scholarship which he presents more thoroughly against textual, codicological, and political developments. In particular, the extent to which scholarship and translations flow between languages and across fields is a significant takeaway from his work; the use of Danish material emerging from a national historical context to establish alternative ideas about the Severians is a good example of this, even if the transferability of this material arose in part out of a specific set of underdiscussed codicological issues. In the future, it would be useful to see closer reflection of the Severian arguments in this historiography, the better to grasp the strength and trajectory of this historiographical impulse.

None of the arguments formerly advanced as to the Severian background of the Rūs are particularly convincing; there is a reason these arguments do not continue to be forwarded. I do not see an analytical use for their reintegration into critical work on Ibn Faḍlān's Rūs (and certainly, I would warn against comparing the choices of translators without recourse to the Arabic, particularly where such comparisons span modern languages, source texts, manuscripts, and political and academic contexts), but I believe they hold value in reminding those of us who work with Ibn Faḍlān about the multitude of reactions and identifications which scholars across the world have had in response to the Rūs of this travel account. For a text which, per Pritsak's "chrestomathic knowledge of passages" formulation, is so often presented in a siloed manner, absent of linguistic, codicological, topical, and historiographical context and nuance, a fresh focus on Ibn Faḍlān's early modern and modern historiography is a pertinent reminder of just how far he continues to travel.

Summary

A response to a debate piece by Makysm Kyrychenko (*Scandia* 2025:91:1) on historiographical interpretations of the Rūs of Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān's tenth-century Arabic travel account as Slavic Severians, this essay engages with the historiography of Ibn Faḍlān between 1814 and 1956 in order to offer nuance to these Severian readings. Acknowledging that the Rūs as they appear in Ibn Faḍlān's eyewitness account have long been open to interpretation, I focus in the first instance on who Ibn Faḍlān understands

them to be. Tracing the development of European scholarship on Ibn Faḍlān against political priorities and the various resonances of the concept of “Rūs”, I outline some of the key factors affecting the source as it moved through translations in various languages. As a text which is primarily accessed in translation, the historiography of Ibn Faḍlān has been flattened and oversimplified; by returning to the first manuscripts used to facilitate his study in both Denmark and Russia, I work to establish a more detailed understanding of how the text was used, received, and transmitted. To this I also add further detail on the 1923 identification of the Mashhad identification, drawing attention to the political ramifications of the Russian and German translations of Ibn Faḍlān which were both published in 1939.

From here, and this expanded historiographical groundwork, I reflect briefly on some of the arguments presented for the Severian identity of Ibn Faḍlān’s Rūs. While these arguments have long since been abandoned – and with good reason – it is instructive to consider how the journey from text and manuscript to accessible translation influenced some of these interpretations. It is also helpful, moreover, to emphasise just how important it is to consider both textual and manuscript contexts and the Arabic language itself in discussion of these interpretations. This is, I argue, a critical step advancing understandings of Ibn Faḍlān, regardless of how his Rūs are interpreted.

Keywords: Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, Rūs, Arabic, historiography, manuscripts

