

Intentions Between Source and Interpreter

A Response to Tonicha Upham

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My fascination with Ahmad Ibn Faḍlān started a long time ago, in my first year as a student at the School of History, when I “contracted” it from my professors, who typically cited excerpts from this source with a great deal of sparkle in their eyes. Since that time, I have kept Ibn Faḍlān’s journey in my mind and was glad to encounter it once again while working on my dissertation. Even though Ibn Faḍlān only occupied a small part of my research, and even though only a minor aspect of his story overlapped with my main topic of interest, I was still eager to delve into it—not only because the source was rich and rewarding, but also because it linked me to the history of my alma mater, Karazin University in Kharkiv (where Dmytro Bahalii and Andrii Kovalevskiy taught, the latter also being an alumnus). However, the central focus of my research was the history of the Severians, and my specific task was to demonstrate how different intentions shaped particular interpretations and broader views of this history. Keeping this task in mind guided my approach to Ibn Faḍlān and would later influence both the structure and central argument of my article. This, in turn, prompted a response from Tonicha Upham, an expert in medieval Islamicate geographical and historical sources on the Rus’ and, in particular, the representation of Rus’ gender in these sources.

Tonicha Upham correctly observes that I primarily focused on comparing different interpretations, thus overlooking the possibility that readers might expect more context and explanation with regard to some of the topics I mentioned. In this respect, her comprehensive response helps address this omission, thus offering a more detailed picture of the source as well as the history of how it has been studied and interpreted in the West. At times, she also extends beyond the immediate topic and offers extensive details on Bulghar, Bashkir, and Tatar historiography, the history of the discovery of the MS 5229 manuscript, and related matters.

Although I agree with most of the arguments presented by Tonicha Upham, I would like to make a few minor clarifications and additional comments, both regarding my original text and the response it prompted.

Intentionalism as the central focus of the article

Tonicha Upham argues that engaging with Ibn Faḍlān's text should not be limited to "comparing translations without recourse to any version of the Arabic text". While I generally agree with this point, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the main focus of my original article was not on Ibn Faḍlān, nor the Rus' or the Severians. My aim was to highlight the role of intentionalism among interpreters and scholars engaging with sources such as Ibn Faḍlān. This purpose led me to specifically focus on interpretations rather than on establishing their validity in relation to the source itself. Moreover, this could have been done with any other source instead of Ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla* and with any other people instead of the Rus' or the Severians. Even if we treat them as variables, represented by *x* and *y*, the main idea remains the same: intentions always stand between the sources and their interpreters, thus shaping their decisions.

All of us in academia share this sin of intentionalism, and sometimes even of emplotting our research outcomes to fit in with the points we wish to make. We do so because we are all deeply influenced by our intellectual interests and professional pursuits. My main interest in history has for a long time been its inherent fragility and how easily our understanding of the past shifts with changes in our worldview. Hence, I used Ibn Faḍlān as an example and structured my article around interpretations that led to the notion of the Rus' as the Severians. Tonicha Upham, on the other hand, primarily focuses on Islamicate sources concerning the Viking diaspora (mostly the Rus' and their gender representations), which led to her response to my article being rich with insightful points on those particular topics.

Nevertheless, although Tonicha Upham in her response mainly focuses on the source itself, some of her points and evidence still support my argument concerning the role of intentions when interpreting sources. I found it particularly noteworthy that, in his Latin translation of Ibn Faḍlān, Rasmussen rendered "the garden" as "Valhalla", and that this decision was met with a positive reaction from the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters. This is yet another illustration of how the interpreter's affiliation influenced his choice.

The female sacrifice: a “slave” or a “girl”

Tonicha Upham claims that in my article, I am “repeatedly signalling” that the female sacrificed during the funeral in Ibn Faḍlān’s story was “only a slave in James Montgomery’s interpretation”, while at the same time in my text also maintaining that she was a “girl”. As noted in a footnote at the beginning of my article, I predominantly relied on Kovalevskiy (1956) in my citations of Ibn Faḍlān, only in some cases resorting to James Montgomery (2017) when a more precise English translation was needed. Accordingly, I used the term “girl” following Kovalevskiy. I fully agree that the female in this part of the story was a slave, which is precisely why I placed Kovalevskiy’s “girl” inside quotation marks. Moreover, I felt obliged to mention (only once—not “repeatedly”) that Montgomery (not “only Montgomery”) offered a different interpretation.

Kovalevskiy also recognised that the girl in question was a slave. In his comments to this passage, he wrote that, although the term *li-jawārihi* (ليـجـاـوـاـرـيـهـ) actually refers to female slaves, he still preferred to “retain the original meaning of the words”, since two girls are mentioned later in the story, clearly not slaves, yet still referred to by the same term: *al-jārayatayn* (النيتـيـراـجـاـل).¹ In a subsequent comment on these “two girls”, Kovalevskiy argues that they are presented in the story as daughters of the Angel of Death, and since she could not be understood as a slave, nor could her daughters. Hence, he concludes that the word *jāriya* (جـاـرـيـا) cannot unconditionally be translated as “a slave”.² One might object that accomplices of the Angel of Death “were not her daughters by flesh, but only by soul”³ (as Bahalii put it), but this makes Kovalevskiy’s point even stronger.

Further in her response, Tonicha Upham argues that translational choices in the historiography of Ibn Faḍlān are usually influenced by the fact that translators and scholars were predominantly male, had “attitudes towards both women and slavery”, and that “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”. I should note that translators of Ibn Faḍlān into Slavic languages typically neglected to comment on this gloomy part of the story, even though none of them omitted it. Nor did scholars who studied Ibn Faḍlān pay all that much attention to this passage (at least in Severian historiography), but this

1 Андрей Ковалевский, *Книга Ахмеда ибн-Фадлана о его путешествии на Волгу в 921–922 гг.*, Kharkiv 1956, p. 246.

2 Ковалевский 1956, p. 255.

3 Дмитрий Багалей, *История Северной земли до половины XIV столетия*, Kyiv 1882, p. 88.

does not mean that it left them unaffected. My first encounter with this detailed description of the assault and murder of a young female slave in Ibn Faḍlān's story evoked deeply disturbing feelings in me. The same could probably be said of Bahalii over a century ago, as this description affected him so strongly that he immediately discarded it as "absolutely unbelievable" and "a fantasy" "prompted by the desire to boast before his fellow citizens of the wonders he had seen on his journey".⁴ However, it should be noted that what caused the most objection for Bahalii was not the assault itself but the fact that it was disrespectful to the deceased.

One last point regarding this issue is that Tonicha Upham mainly focuses on the fact that the slave in this passage was female, and that this is the reason why male scholars tend to overlook its significance, either intentionally or due to a lack of interest. However, in order to avoid "losing sight of the text itself" behind interpretations and historiography, it should be noted that, although we witness the ritual murder of a female slave through the eyes of Ibn Faḍlān, the source clearly indicates that this fate could also befall male slaves. According to Ibn Faḍlān, when a noble Rus' man died, his family asked "his slave-girls and slave-boys" to offer themselves as a sacrifice. Thus, in other circumstances, a male slave could have been sacrificed, although I should note that Ibn Faḍlān concludes this passage by stating: "It is usually slave-girls who make this offer".⁵

On Kovalevskiy, Krachkovskiy, and politics in translation

Tonicha made the effort to expand on my text with some details about Andrii Kovalevskiy's arrest. In particular, she mentioned (citing Mikhail Rodionov) that he was arrested for having "Ukrainian connections". Although this conclusion might seem unsurprising, I feel that it is necessary to clarify some facts.

The only thing that is certain is that, following a denunciation, Kovalevskiy was accused under Article 58 (counter-revolutionary activities) of the Russian SFSR Penal Code. However, it is difficult to determine which specific crime the unknown denunciator attributed to him or under which paragraph of Article 58 he was charged. Article 58 was very broad and contained many subpoints, including treason, armed uprising, contacts with foreigners for counter-revolutionary purposes, support of the international bourgeoisie,

4 Багалей 1882, pp. 88–89.

5 James E. Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah", *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 2017:3, p. 14.

espionage, terrorist acts, counter-revolutionary propaganda, and even failure to report counter-revolutionary activity. Kovalevskiy himself avoided talking about this period in his life, but it is known that he was accused without trial,⁶ and that he during interrogation was asked about planning a terrorist act⁷—which points to paragraph 8 of Article 58 (terrorist acts). For a short period, he also worked as a guide at the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, where many of his clients were high-ranking foreign visitors.⁸ As a result, he might have been accused of contacts with foreigners (Article 58, paragraph 3).

Indeed, the NKVD had many reasons for persecuting Kovalevskiy: he came from an old noble Ukrainian family; he was a passionate admirer of Ukrainian history, folklore, and language; he published his early articles in Ukrainian; he even took part in the Ukrainian national youth movement when he was just a teenager;⁹ and his wife, Cassandra Costan, also came from a family that the Soviet state had reasons to distrust (a wealthy family of Rumaicis, native Ukrainian Greeks, with Cassandra devoting her life to researching her people). Nevertheless, the official reason for his persecution remains unknown. The fact that the punishment was relatively soft and that he, after serving five years in a corrective labour colony (first in Komi, then in Mordovia), was allowed to continue his academic career and even teach Ukrainian students in Kharkiv¹⁰ either suggests some minor offence or even punishment without a crime at all (which was a common practice at the time, when the Soviet ruling apparatus sought to “intimidate the entire population with mass arrests and by sending millions of ordinary citizens to terrible camps”¹¹). What also speaks against the “national” reason for persecution is that, after serving his sentence, Kovalevskiy continued to use Ukrainian in correspondence with some of his colleagues,¹² published several works in Ukrainian,¹³ and even used Ukrainian when signing his books, which he

6 Долинина А. А., *Невольник долга. Петербургское востоковедение*, St. Petersburg 1994, p. 284.

7 Митряев А., “Життєвий і творчий шлях видатного українського сходознавця Андрія Петровича Ковалівського (до 100-річчя від дня народження)”, *Східний світ* 1995–1996:2–І, p. 16.

8 Кадеєв В. И., “Годы студенческие”, *Харківський історіографічний збірник* 2012:ІІ, p. 229.

9 Наумов Сергій, “А. П. Ковалівський в українському молодіжному русі (1914–1917 роки)”, *Східний світ* 1995–1996:2–І, pp. 59–63.

10 Роменский А., “Два столетия медиевистики в Харькове”, *Vox medii aevi* 2013:3:10, p. XXXVIII.

11 Восленский М. С., *Номенклатура*, Moscow 1991, p. 101.

12 “Андрій Ковалівський. З листування 1964–1965”, *Україна в минулому*, Kyiv–Lviv 1996:8.

13 “Бібліографія А. П. Ковалівського”, *Східний світ* 1995–1996:2–І, pp. 26–29.

then presented to the university library. Such a practice was not common at the time and would have been unexpected from someone who allegedly served a prison sentence for Ukrainian nationalism.

In Ignaty Krachkovsky's defence, it should be noted that he tried to save Kovalevskiy from imprisonment. From his correspondence with Kovalevskiy's father, we learn that Krachkovsky repeatedly pleaded Kovalevskiy's innocence before prosecutors. He was also distressed that his name was attributed to the translation of Ibn Faḍlān's text rather than the actual interpreter. In one of his letters to a fellow historian, Krachkovsky wrote: "It is crucial for me to show that this work is only edited by me, but not mine, and the fact that the name of the author has disappeared is something beyond my power."¹⁴

Another issue to be addressed in this context is Tonicha Upham's statement that "in 1956, when Kovalevskii published a fresh edition and study of Ibn Faḍlān, he similarly did not acknowledge his prior work on the subject." However, a close examination of that publication makes it clear that he did. As the first item of the list of previous translations referred to in the new text, he put "Translations and commentaries by A.P. Kovalevsky in publication 'The Travel of Ibn Fadlan to the Volga', edited by academic I.Y. Krachkovsky, 1939".¹⁵ Moreover, in his new commentaries, Kovalevskiy often referred to the 1939 edition as his own. For example, he wrote: "For now, I will keep my previous translation (Kov., 1000)" or "Thus, all previous futile attempts to understand this passage (Kov., 1027) are rendered obsolete."¹⁶ (Here "Kov." stands for 'Kovalevskiy' while the numbers 1000 and 1027 refer to relevant comments in the 1939 edition).

The final point regarding this topic concerns the reasoning that Tonicha Upham presents for her extensive excursus into Krachkovsky, Kovalevskiy, Togan, and their race to publish the first translation of Ibn Faḍlān, namely her claim that "a thorough consideration of the political intricacies of Ibn Faḍlān is important", particularly in light of my stance that contemporary politics and culture shape understandings of historical texts. I agree with this statement in general; however, what this example demonstrates is merely that politics forced interpreters to work faster rather than pushing them to adopt specific interpretations in favour of their political or cultural worldview. I would even suggest that this rush made interpreters more straightforward in their interpretations than what might have been the case under a more relaxed and extended timeframe.

Although the list of issues I wished to address in my response to Tonicha

¹⁴ Долинина, Невольник долга, 1994, p. 284.

¹⁵ Ковалевский 1956, p. 299.

¹⁶ Ковалевский 1956, pp. 250, 252.

Upham is far from complete, I must limit myself to these few for reasons of format. In conclusion, I am very glad that the topic I raised has sparked a discussion and created a space for further reflection and diverse perspectives.

Summary

This article serves as a response to Tonicha Upham's comments on my previous publication in *Scandia* (91:1, 2025). While Upham suggests that I should have engaged more directly with Ibn Faḍlān's original Arabic text, I emphasise that the aim of my article was not to reconstruct the source but to demonstrate how the intentions of interpreters inevitably shape the ways in which sources are read. I also address two additional points: the reasons why Kovalevskiy rendered the sacrificial victim as a "girl" rather than a "slave" in his translation of Ibn Faḍlān's account of a Rus' funeral, as well as the possible circumstances surrounding Kovalevskiy's arrest.

