Two Arabic Travel Books

Accounts of China and India

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and

Mission to the Volga

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Kayar Ahmad bin Fadlan

Mission to the Volga

This is the written account of Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-Abbás ibn Rāshid. In the letter of al-Ḥasan, son of Yilṭawr, the king of the Saqalībah, which al-Muqtadir the Commander of the Faithful received, he also beseeched him to build a fort to protect his kingdom. His requests were granted.

The representative of the king of the Saqalībah, which al-Muqtadir the Commander of the Faithful received, the king petitioned al-Muqtadir to send people to instruct him in law and acquainted him with the rules of Islam according to the sharia, and to construct a mosque and build a minbar from which he could proclaim al-Muqtadir's name throughout his kingdom. He also beseeched him to build a fort to protect him against the kings who opposed him. His requests were granted.

We traveled from Baghdad, City of Peace, on Thursday, the twelfth of Safar, 309 [June 21, 921]. We stayed one day in Nahrawān, then rode hard until we reached al-Daskarab, where we stayed three days. Then we traveled without delay or diversion and came to Hulwān, where we stayed two days.

Read to here
Mission to the Volga

called Fălix, an inhabitant of al-Jurjāniyyah. We trusted in almighty God, putting our fate in His hands.

We left al-Jurjāniyyah on Monday, the second of Dhu l-Qa‘dah, 309 [Monday, March 4, 922], and stopped at an outpost called Zamjān, the Gate of the Turks. The following morning we traveled as far as a stopping post of the Turks. The snow had fallen so heavily that it came up to the camels’ knees. Deep into the realm of the Turks through a barren, mountainless desert.

We met no one. We crossed for ten days. Our bodies suffered terrible injuries. We were exhausted. The cold was biting, the snowstorms never-ending. It made the cold of Khwārazm seem like summertime. We forgot all about our previous sufferings and were ready to give up the ghost.

One day, the cold was unusually biting. Takin was traveling beside me, talking in Turkic to a Turk at his side. He laughed and said, “This Turk wants to know, ‘What does our Lord want from us? He is killing us with this cold. If we knew what He wanted, then we could just give it to Him.’” “Tell him,” I replied, “that He wants you to declare ‘There is no god but God.’” “Well, if we knew Him, we’d do it,” he said with a laugh. 14

We came to a place where there was a huge quantity of ḍagh wood and stopped. The members of the caravan lit fires and got them going. They took their clothes off and dried them by the fires. Then we departed, traveling as quickly and with as much energy as we could manage, from midnight until the midday or afternoon prayer, when we would stop for a rest. After fifteen nights of this, we came to a huge rocky mountain. Springs of water ran down it and gathered to form a lake at its foot.

We crossed the mountain and reached a Turkic tribe known as the Ghuzziyyah. Much to our surprise, we discovered that they are nomads who live in animal-hair tents that they pitch and strike regularly. Their tents were pitched with some in one place and the same number in another place, as is the practice of transhumant nomads. They lead wretched lives. They are like roaming asses. 18 They practice no recognizable form of monotheism, they do not base their beliefs on reason, and they worship nothing—indeed they call their own chiefs “lord.” 19 When one of them consults his chief on a matter, he says to him, “My lord, what shall I do about such and such?” “They decide matters by consultation,” 20 though it is quite possible for the lowest and most worthless individual in their community to turn up and overturn the consensus they...
Mission to the Volga

have reached. To be sure, I have heard them declare, "There is no god but God, Muhammad is God's emissary." But this was a way of ingratiating themselves with the Muslims passing through their lands and not out of conviction. When one of them is wronged or something unpleasant happens to him, he raises his head to the heavens and shouts, "Bir Tankri," which in Turkic means "by God, by the One." Bir means "one" and Tankri is "God" in the language of the Turks. They do not clean themselves when they defecate or urinate, and they do not wash themselves when intercourse puts them in a state of ritual impurity. They avoid contact with water, especially in the winter.

Their womenfolk do not cover themselves in the presence of a man, whether he be one of their menfolk or not. A woman will not cover any part of her body in front of anyone, no matter who. One day we stopped at a tent and sat down. The man's wife sat with us. During conversation, she suddenly uncovered her vulva and scratched it, right in front of us. We covered our faces and exclaimed, "God forgive us!" but her husband simply laughed and said to the interpreter, "Tell them: we might uncover it in your presence and you might see it, but she keeps it safe so no one can get to it. This is better than her covering it up and letting others have access to it." Illicit intercourse is unheard of. If they catch anyone attempting it in any way, they tear him in half, in the following manner: they join the branches of two trees, tie the culprit to the branches and then let the trees loose. The man tied to the trees is torn in two.

One of them heard me reciting the Qur'an and found it beautiful. He approached the interpreter and said, "Tell him not to stop." One day, this man said to me via the interpreter, "Ask this Arab, 'Does our great and glorious Lord have a wife?'" I was shocked by his words, praised God and asked His forgiveness. He copied my actions. Such is the custom of the Turk—whenever he hears a Muslim declare God's glory and attest His uniqueness, he copies him.

Their marriage customs are as follows. One man asks another for one of his womenfolk, be it his daughter, sister, or any other woman he possesses, in exchange for such and such a number of Khiwaramzi garments. When he is paid in full, he hands her over. Sometimes the dowry is in camels, horses, or the like. The man is not granted access to his future wife until he has paid the full dowry that he has agreed with her guardian. Once paid, he shows up unashamedly, enters her dwelling, and takes possession of her right there and then, in the presence of her father, mother, and brothers. No one stops him.
Mission to the Volga

When one of them dies and leaves a wife and sons behind, the eldest son marries his dead father's wife, provided she is not his birth mother. No one else can perform the ritual wash in their absence, except at night when they are not seen, because they have no proof. They exact payment from him and exclaim, "This man has planted something in the water" and wants to put a spell on us!" No Muslim can cross their territory without first befriending one of them. He lodges with him and brings gifts from the Muslim land: a roll of cloth, a headscarf for his wife, pepper, miller, raisins, and nuts. When he arrives, his friend pitches a yurt for him and provides him with sheep, in accordance with his status. In this way, the Muslim can perform the ritual slaughter, as the Turks do not do this but instead beat the sheep on the head until they die. If someone has decided to travel and uses some of the camels and horses belonging to his friend the Turk, or if he borrows some money, his debt with his friend remains unpaid. He takes the camels, horses, and money he needs from his friend. On his return, he pays the Turk his money and returns his camels and horses. So too, if someone a Turk doesn't know passes through and says, "I am your guest. I want some of your camels, horses, and dirhams," he gives him what he asks for. If the merchant dies on the trip and the caravan returns, the Turk comes to meet the caravan and says, "Where is my guest?" If they say, "He is dead," he brings the caravan to a halt, goes up to the most eminent merchant he sees, unites his goods as the merchant looks on, and takes the exact number of dirhams he had advanced to the first merchant, not a penny more. He also takes back the exact number of camels and horses, saying, "He was your cousin, so you are under the greatest obligation to pay his debt." If the guest runs away, he behaves in the same way, only this time he says, "He was a Muslim like you. You get it back from him." If he does not meet his Muslim guest on the road, he asks three men about him, saying, "Where is he?" When told where he is, he travels, even for days, till he finds him and claims his property. Along with the gifts he gave him, the Turk also behaves like this when he travels to al-Jurjaniyyah. He asks for his guest and stays with him until he leaves. If the Turk dies while staying with his Muslim friend and the Muslim later passes through this territory as a member of a caravan, they put him to death, with the words, "You imprisoned him and killed him. Had you not imprisoned him, he would not have died." Likewise, they kill...
Makmur to the Volga

The Muslim who gave the Turk alcohol and he falls and dies. If he does not cease drinking, death will be his punishment. They seize the most important member of the caravan and kill him, except for one who is not a member. They afterwards destroy the body of the man who has died and then depart. A man from Khazaria lodged with the tribe of the Turks and lived for a while among them. He then, however, was asked to give him the body of the Turk who had died. The Turk was angered and said, "I shall not surrender to death according to what is true or what is false. The son shall be fetched. Both must be put to death and then the march must be made."
Ibn Faḍlān said: The members of a household do not approach someone who is ill. His slaves, male and female, wait on him. He is put in a tent, away from the other tents, where he remains until he dies or recovers. A slave or a pauper is simply thrown out onto the open plain and left. The Turks dig a large ditch, in the shape of a chamber for their dead. They fetch the deceased, clothe him in his tunic and girdle, and give him his bow. They put a wooden cup filled with alcohol in his hand and place a wooden vessel of alcohol in front of him. They bring all his wealth and lay it beside him in the chamber. They put him in a sitting position and then build the roof. On top they construct what looks like a yurt made of clay. Horses are fetched, depending on how many he owned. They can slaughter any number of horses, from a single horse up to a hundred or two. They eat the horse meat, except for the head, legs, hide, and tail, which they nail to pieces of wood, saying, “His horses which he rides to the Garden.” If he has shown great bravery and killed someone, they carve wooden images, as many as the men he has killed, place them on top of his grave and say, “His retainers who serve him in the Garden.” Sometimes they do not kill the horses for a day or two. Then an elder will exhort them: “I have seen So-and-So,” (i.e., the deceased) “in a dream and he said to me, ‘You see me here in front of you. My companions have gone before me. My feet are cracked from following them. I cannot catch up with them. I am left here, all alone.’” Then they bring his horses, slaughter them, and gibet them at his grave. A day or two later, the elder arrives and says, “I have seen So-and-So. He said, ‘Inform my household and companions that I have caught up with those who went before me and have recovered from my exhaustion.’”

Ibn Faḍlān said: Each and every one of the Turks plucks his beard but does not touch his mustache. I would often see one of their aged elders, clad in a sheepskin, his beard plucked but with a little left under his chin. If you caught sight of him from a distance, you would be convinced he was a Billy goat.

The king of the Ghuzziyyah Turks is called yabgha. This is the title given to the ruler of the tribe and is their name for their emir. His deputy is called kūdharkin. Any one who deputizes for a chief is called kūdharkin.

Upon leaving the region where this group of Turks was camped, we stopped with their field marshal, Atrak, son of al-Qasghân. Turkish yurts
Mission to the Volga

were patched, and we were lodged in them. He had a large retinue with many dependents, and his tents were big. He gave us sheep and horses: sheep for slaughter and horses for riding. He summoned his paternal cousins and members of his household, held a banquet and killed many sheep. We had presented him with a gift of clothing, along with raisins, nuts, pepper, and millet.24 I watched his wife, who had previously been the wife of his father.25 Take some meat, milk, and a few of the gifts we had presented and go out into the open, where she dug a hole and buried everything, uttering some words. "What is she saying?" I asked the interpreter, and he replied, "She says, 'This is a gift for al-Qataghân, the father of Atrak. The Arabs gave it to him.'"

That night the interpreter and I were granted an audience in Atrak's yurt.31 We delivered the letter from Nadhir al-Harâmi, instructing him to embrace Islam. The letter specifically mentioned that he was to receive fifty dinars (some of them musayyabas), three measures of musk, some tanned hides, and two rolls of Marw cloth. Out of this we had cut for him two tunic, a pair of leather boots, a garment of silk brocade, and five silk garments. We presented his gift and gave his wife a headscarf and a signet ring. I read out the letter and he told the interpreter, "I will not respond until you have returned. Then I shall inform the caliph of my decision in writing." He removed the silk shirt he was wearing and put on the robe of honor we had just mentioned. I noticed that the tunic underneath was so filthy that it had fallen to pieces. It is their custom not to remove the garment next to their body until it falls off in tatters.

He had plucked all of his beard and mustache, so he looked like an eunuch.32 Even so, I heard the Turks state that he was their most accomplished horseman. In fact, I was with him one day, on horseback. A goose flew past. I saw him string his bow, move his horse into position under the bird, and fire. He shot the goose dead.

One day he summoned the four commanders of the adjacent territory:33 Târkhân, Yínâl, the nephew of Târkhân and Yínâl, and Yîlghîz. Târkhân was blind and lame and had a withered arm, but he was by far the most eminent and important. Atrak said, "These are the envoys from the king of the Arabs to my son-in-law, Almish, son of Shîlki. I cannot rightfully allow them to go any further without consulting you." Târkhân said, "Never before have we
Mission to the Volga

seen or heard of a thing like this. Never before has an envoy from the caliph passed through our realm, even when our fathers were alive. I suspect that it is the caliph's design to send these men to the Khazars and mobilize them as ransom for our fellow tribesmen taken prisoner by the king of the Khazars. They debated like this for seven long days. We were in the jaws of death. Then, as is their wont, they came to a unanimous decision: they would allow us to continue on our way. We presented Târkhân with a robe of honor: a Marw caftan and two cuts of woven cloth. We gave a tunic to his companions, including Yînâl. We also gave them pepper, millet, and flat breads as gifts. Then they left.

We pushed on as far as the Bghndî River, where the people got their camel-hide rafts out, spread them flat, put the round saddle frames from their Turkish camels inside the hides, and stretched them tight. They loaded them with clothes and goods. When the rafts were full, groups of people, four, five, and six strong, sat on top of them, took hold of pieces of khâdh-khânk and used them as oars. The rafts floated on the water, spinning round and round, while the people paddled furiously. We crossed the river in this manner. The horses and the camels were urged on with shouts, and they swam across. We needed to send a group of fully armed soldiers across the river first, before the rest of the caravan. They were the advance guard, protection for the people against the Bâshqârîs. There was a fear they might carry out an ambush during the crossing. This is how we crossed the Bghndî River. Then we crossed a river called the Jâm, also on rafts, then the Jâkhsa, the Adhî, the Ardîn, the Wârsî, the Akhî, and the Wînâ. These are all mighty rivers.

Then we reached the Bajarânî. They were encamped beside a still lake as big as a sea. They are a vivid brown color, shave their beards, and live in miserable poverty, unlike the Ghuzziyâh. I saw some Ghuzziyâh who owned ten thousand horses and a hundred thousand head of sheep. The sheep graze mostly on what lies underneath the snow, digging for the grass with their hooves. If they do not find grass, they eat the snow instead and grow
Mission to the Volga

As soon as the king of the Saqilah heard this, he was afraid that the king of the Khazars might take her by force, as he had her sister, so he married her to the king of the Askil, who recognizes his authority. It was to the king of the Khazars that forced the king of the Saqilah to write to the caliph and petition him to build him a fortress.

Ibn Fadlan said: I asked him the following question one day and said: "You have an extensive kingdom, many belongings, and considerable wealth. Why did you petition the caliph for an unspecified sum of money to build a fortress?" He replied, "I could see that the realm of Islam was flourishing and that the wealth of the Muslims was acquired lawfully. That is why I asked for it. If I had wanted to build a fort using my own silver and gold, I could have. I wanted the money of the Commander of the Faithful to bring me blessings, so I sent him my petition."

Ibn Fadlan said: I also saw the Rūisiyyah. They had come to trade and had disembarked at the Itil River. I have never seen bodies as nearly perfect as theirs. As tall as palm trees, fair and reddish, they wear neither tunics nor caftans. Every man wears a cloak with which he covers half of his body, so that one arm is uncovered. They carry axes, swords, and daggers and always have them to hand. They use Frankish swords with broad, ridged blades. They are dark from the tips of their toes right up to their necks—trees, pictures, and the like. Every woman wears a small box made of iron, silver, brass, or gold, depending on her husband's financial worth and social standing, tied at her breasts. The box has a ring to which a knife is attached, also tied at her breasts. The women wear neck rings of gold and silver. When a man has amassed ten thousand dirhams, he has a neck ring made for his wife. When he has amassed twenty thousand dirhams, he has two neck rings made. For every subsequent ten thousand, he gives a neck ring to his wife. This means a woman can wear many neck rings. The jewelry they prize the most is the dark ceramic beads they have aboard their boats and which they trade among themselves. They pay beads for one dirham each and string them together as necklaces for their wives.
They are the filthiest of all God's creatures. They have no modesty when it comes to defecating or urinating and do not wash themselves when intercourse comes. They do not even wash their hands after eating. Indeed, they are like roaming asses. They arrive, Moor their boats by the Iril, and build large wooden houses on its banks. They share a house, in groups of ten and twenty, sometimes more, sometimes fewer. Each reclines on a couch. They are accompanied by beautiful female slaves for trade with the merchants. They have intercourse with their female slaves in full view of their companions. Sometimes they gather in a group and do this in front of each other. A merchant may come in to buy a female slave and stumble upon the owner having intercourse. The Bxis does not leave her alone until he has satisfied his urge. They must wash their faces and their heads each day with the filthiest and most polluted water you can imagine. Let me explain. Every morning a male slave brings a large basin full of water and hands it to his master. He washes his hands, face, and hair in the water. Then he dips the comb in the water and combs his hair. Then he blows his nose and spits in the basin. He is prepared to do any filthy, impure act in the water. When he has finished, the female slave carries the basin to the man next to him who performs the same routine as his comrade. She carries it from one man to the next and goes around to everyone in the house. Every man blows his nose and spits in the basin, and then washes his face and hair.

They disembark as soon as their boats dock. Each carries bread, meat, onions, milk, and alcohol to a large block of wood set in the ground. The piece of wood has a face on it, like the face of a man. It is surrounded by small figurines placed in front of large blocks of wood set in the ground. He prostrates himself before the large figure and says, "Lord, I have come from a distant land, with such and such a number of female slaves and such and such a number of sable pelts." He lists all his merchandise. Then he says, "And I have brought this offering." He leaves his offering in front of the piece of wood, saying, "I want you to bless me with a rich merchant with many dinars and dirhams who will buy from me whatever I wish."
Mission to the Voiga

and not haggle over any price I set." Then he leaves. If he finds it hard to sell his goods and has to stay there too many days, he comes back with a second and a third offering. If his wishes are not fulfilled, he brings an offering to every single figurine and seeks its intercession, saying, "These are the wives, daughters, and sons of our lord." He goes up to each figurine in turn and petitions it, begging for its intercession and groveling before it. Sometimes business is good, and he makes a quick sale. In that case, he says, "My lord has satisfied my request, so I need to compensate him." He acquires some sheep or cows and kills them, gives a portion of the meat as alms, and places the rest before the large block of wood and the small ones around it. He ties the heads of the cows or the sheep to the piece of wood set up on the ground. When night falls, the dogs come and eat it all up, and the man who has gone to all this trouble says, "My lord is pleased with me and has eaten my offering."

When one of them falls ill, they pitch a tent far away and lay him down inside, with some bread and water. They do not approach him or speak to him. Indeed, they have no contact with him for as long as he is ill, especially if he is a social inferior or a slave. If he recovers and gets back on his feet, he rejoins them. If he dies, they set fire to him. They do not bury dead slaves but leave them as food for the dogs and the birds.

When they catch a thief or a bandit, they take him to a solid tree and put a sturdy rope around his neck. They tie him to the tree and he hangs there until he eventually decomposes from exposure to the rain and the winds.

I was told that they set fire to their chieftains when they die. Sometimes they do more, so I was very keen to verify this. Then I learned of the death of an important man. They had placed him in his grave, with a roof raised over him, for ten days while they finished cutting and sewing his garments. When the deceased is poor, they build a small boat for him, place him inside and burn it. When he is rich, they collect his possessions and divide them into three portions. One-third goes to his household, one-third is spent on his funeral garments, and one-third is spent on the alcohol they drink the day his female slave kills herself and is cremated with her master. They are
مهمة إلى الفولغا

عندما تشربوا الكحول، يشربونه يوم وليلة. في بعض الأحيان، يشربهم في حالة مخلوق، في حالة مخلوقات. في هذه الحالة، يشربهم في حالة مخلوقات. في هذه الحالة، يشربهم في حالة مخلوقات.

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silk cap fringed with sable on his head. They carried him inside the yurt that was on the ship and rested him on a quilt, propping him up with the cushions on the ship and beside him. Then they placed the alcohol, fruit, and basil beside him. Then they placed the yurt on the boat. They placed all his weaponry beside him. They made two holes into the boat, cut them into pieces with a sword, and threw horses gallop into a sweat, cut them into pieces with a sword, and threw the meat onto the boat. They cut two cows into pieces and threw them on board. Then they produced a cock and a hen, killed them, and put them on board too.

Meanwhile, the female slave who had expressed her wish to die came in and went, entering one yurt after another. The owner of the yurt would have intercourse with her and say, "Tell your master that I have done this out of love for you." At the time of the Friday late afternoon prayer they brought the female slave to an object they had built that resembled a door-frame. She stood on the hands of the men and rose like the sun above the door-frame. She uttered some words, and they brought her down. They lifted her up a second time, and she did what she had done before. They lowered her and lifted her a third time, and she did what she had done the last two times. Then they handed her a hen. She cut off the head and cast it aside. They picked the hen up and threw it onto the boat. I quizzed the interpreter about her actions and he said, "The first time they lifted her up, she said, 'Look, I see my father and mother.' The second time she said, 'Look, I see all my dead kindred, seated.' The third time she said, 'Look, I see my master, seated in the Garden.' The Garden is beautiful and dark green. He is with his men and his retainers. He summons me. Go to him." They took her to the boat and she removed both of her bracelets, handing them to the woman called the Angel of Death, the one who would kill her. She also removed two anklets she was wearing, handing them to the two female slaves who had waited upon her, the daughters of the woman known as the Angel of Death.
They lifted her onto the boat but did not take her into the yurt. The men approached with shields and sticks and handed her a cup of alcohol. Before drinking it she chanted over it. The interpreter said to me, "Now she bids farewell." She was handed another cup which she drank and chanted for a long time. The crone urged her to drink it and to enter the yurt where her master was lying. I could see she was befuddled. She went to enter the yurt but missed it, placing her head to one side of the yurt, between it and the boat. The crone took her head and entered the yurt with her. The men began to bang their shields with the sticks, so that the sound of her screaming would be drowned out. Otherwise, it would terrify the other female slaves, and they would not seek to die with their masters.

Six men entered the yurt. They all had intercourse with the female slave and then laid her beside her master. Two held her feet, two her hands. The crone called the Angel of Death placed a rope around her neck with the ends crossing one another and handed it to two of the men to pull on. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in between her ribs, here and there, while the two men strangled her with the rope until she died.

The deceased's nearest male relative came forward. He picked up a piece of wood and set it alight. He was completely naked. He walked backwards, the nape of his neck towards the boat, his face towards the people. He had the ignited piece of wood in one hand and had his other hand on his anus. He set fire to the wooden structures under the boat. The people came forward with sticks and firewood. They each carried a lighted stick that they threw on top of the wood. The wood caught fire. Then the boat, the yurt, the dead man, the female slave, and everything else on board caught fire. A fearsome wind picked up. The flames grew higher and higher and blazed fiercely.
One of the Rūsiyāḥ was standing beside me. I heard him speaking. I asked him what he had said, and the interpreter who was with me. I asked him what he had said, and he replied, "He said, 'You Arabs, you are a lot of fools!'" "Why is that?"

Then they left.

 Ibn Fadlān said: It is one of the customs of the king of the Rūsiyāḥ to keep in his palace four hundred of his bravest comrades and most trusted companions beside him. They die when he dies and sacrifice themselves to protect him. Each one has a female slave to wait on him, wash his head, and provide him with food and drink, and a second to have intercourse with. These four hundred companions sit below his huge couch, studded with precious stones. Forty concubines who belong to the king also sit on his couch. Sometimes he has intercourse with one of them in the presence of his comrades. He never steps off his throne. When he wants to satisfy an urge, he does so in a salver. When he wants to ride, he has his horse brought to the throne and mounts it from there. When he wants to dismount, he rides the horse to the throne so he can dismount there. He has a deputy, who leads the armies, fights the enemy, and represents him among his subjects.