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## Vikings in the East: A Brief Survey of the Textual Sources

In my guest lectures on Norwegian literature to Georgian students, I have often been asked about the Vikings and their forays into the lands of the Eastern Slavs and beyond. In the following I will try to answer their questions by giving a brief survey of what we know about the Vikings from extant Eastern sources.

The Vikings referred to their expeditions to these parts as *Austrvegr* or the Eastern route. Historians relying on the early East Slavic *Primary Chronicle* have traditionally taken for granted the pre-eminence of “the route from the Vikings to the Greeks,” i.e. the Dnieper route from the Baltic past Kiev to Constantinople. This route—*путь из варяг в греки*—went via the network of navigable rivers that with a few short portages links the rivers that flow west into the Baltic with the river Dnieper, which flows south into the Black Sea.

According to the chronicle’s version of the history of Rus, the princes of Kiev owed the legitimacy of their political power to their descent from the Varangian Rurik, the legendary ancestor of the Rurikids, the ruling dynasty of Kievan Rus after 862.

Furthermore, in this version, Kiev was already a city when the Varangians arrived there in mid-ninth century. Until the last quarter of the last century it was believed that archaeological evidence supported this story. New excavations, and the re-examination of earlier material in the light of the new finds, have shown that Kiev, in fact, did not exist as a city before the late ninth century. It was only in the tenth century that Kiev on the river Dnieper developed into a significant township and the commercial and political centre of the emergent state of Rus, a name that refers to its founders, Vikings from Scandinavia, known to the Byzantines as *οι Ρως*, i.e. the Rhos.

By then, Kiev had become a significant station on the way from Scandinavia to Byzantium. At the outset, it had a Viking ruling class, but very quickly the Scandinavians were absorbed into the local East Slav population. In 988, Vladimir Sviatoslavich—Old Norse: Valdamarr Sveinaldsson—converted to Orthodox Christianity.

The close links that developed between Byzantium and Kiev after the conversion have overshadowed the importance of another, more eastern Viking route. This route is today referred to as “the great Volga route” (*великий волжский путь*) and the route

“from the Vikings to the Persians” (из варяг в персы). It went down the river Volga, past the Khazar capital Itil on the Volga (itself also called *Itil*, meaning Big River in Turkish), across the Caspian and into Iran.

Most scholars studying the history of the Vikings in the Middle Ages now agree that the eastern “great Volga route” was the primary artery of the trading and raiding of the Rus.

This shift in perspective is partly due to the fact that more recent excavations in Kiev, Smolensk and other stations along the route “from the Vikings to the Greeks” have revealed very little evidence of lively commercial links with the Byzantine world before the late ninth century. In his study of the problem, Mark Wittow claims that before that, “Kiev, in effect, did not exist” (Whittow 1996:248).

At the same time, the discoveries of Arab dirhams along the Volga, and also in the Baltic, on Gotland and in Scandinavia, show that the Arabs had established strong trade relations with Eastern Europe as early as in the ninth and tenth centuries. It turns out that hundreds of Viking Age graves and buried hoards contain caches of Arab dirhams. According to Thomas S. Noonan, one of the world's leading experts on medieval Scandinavian ties with the Muslim world and a specialist in Viking numismatic history, the dirham was “the coin that helped fuel the Viking Age” (Noonan 1987–1991).

The new archaeological findings corroborate the descriptions of Arab geographers, travelling in the region at the time. They are unison in their assurance that the main artery of Rus trade was not the Dnieper, but the Volga.

Over the past two centuries, many of the Muslim accounts have been translated into European languages, and they have proved increasingly valuable in interpreting archaeological evidence that has emerged and still continues to emerge.

The Arab geographers, historians and travellers frequently quoted are:

- Ibn Khordādhbih (pron. Khurdazbikh, ca. 820–912/913)
- Ibn Fadlān (1<sup>st</sup> half of the tenth century)
- al-Masudi (ca. 896–956)
- al-Istakhrī (mid-tenth century)
- Ibn Hawqal (tenth century)
- Ibn Meskavayh (932-1030)
- Ibn Isfandyar (13<sup>th</sup> century)

It now seems universally accepted that it was not the trade with Byzantium that brought the Rus into the region. It was the huge profits of the fur trade through the Khazarian capital of Itil on the Volga and on to the Islamic world. Only in mid-tenth century an Arab tradition represented by al-Istakhrī and Ibn Hawqal seems to have become aware of the existence of Kiev.

In early ninth century the Rus seem to have travelled as merchants along the Volga route to Serkland—the Old Norse name of the Abbasid Caliphate—selling furs, honey, and slaves in return for silver dirhams. The earliest reference by Muslim writers to the roving Norsemen was made at the beginning of the ninth century by Ibn Khordādhbih (Khurdazbikh). In 844 he wrote about the travels of the saqalibaha—a term generally used for fair-haired, ruddy-complexioned Europeans. They came in their boats, he wrote, “bringing beaver skins and skins of black foxes and swords, from the furthest part of the Slav lands down to the Black Sea.” According to his account, Rus traders transported their wares by camel from Gorgan (Jorjan) at the south-eastern end of the Caspian Sea, to Baghdad, where saqalibah slaves, who had learned Arabic, acted as interpreters.

Towards the end of the century the Rus landed on the shores of the Caspian as raiders. On the evidence of the Arab sources, historians have reconstructed the following raids:

- 1<sup>st</sup> raid: between 864 and 884, aimed at the Gorgan port of Abaskun on the southwest shore of the Caspian Sea.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> raid: in 909/910, also aimed at Abaskun.
- 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1st large-scale raid: in 913/914, first into the Abaskun region, later at Baku.
- 4<sup>th</sup>, 2nd large-scale raid: in 943/945, when the Rus rowed up the Kura (Mtkvari) and captured Barda, the capital of Caucasian Albania (Arran).
- 5<sup>th</sup> campaign: in the 960s against Khazaria.
- 6<sup>th</sup> campaign: in 987–989, when Maymun, emir of Derbent, asked the Rus for help against local chiefs.
- 7<sup>th</sup> campaign: in 1030–1033, raiding the Shirvan region. Defeated by local Muslims in 1033.
- 8<sup>th</sup> campaign: in 1036–1042 an unsuccessful Viking attack against Persia, launched from Sweden by Ingvar the Far-Travelled (Yngvarr víðförli) who went down the Volga and into Serkland.

Here, I would like to focus on the excursions that are directly concerned with the problem of Rus–Caucasian relations.

### **The raid between 864 and 884**

According to the thirteenth-century Arab historian Ibn Isfandiyar's *History of Tabaristan*, they staged their first small-scale raid on the city of Abaskun near the mouth of the river Gorgan on the southwestern coast of the Caspian between 864 and 884. The city was a prosperous trading centre from which merchants travelled to Deylam, Derbent, Itil, and further on the Volga route. The raid may have been provoked by the activities of the Deylamites, who had destabilized the trade, seizing a number of towns in the region, including Gorgan (Djurdjan) and Rey, both important Slik-Road cities, where the Rus had their trading centres.

### **The raid of 909–910** (the Islamic calendar comprises two years in the Christian)

A Rus fleet of 16 vessels again attacked Abaskun, pillaging the city, but they were defeated by the governor of Sari, Akhmad ben al-Kasim, who received support from the Samanids. The next year, the Rus came back in large numbers and set fire to the city of Sari, took a lot of prisoners and went back to sea. Subsequently they separated, some remaining on the ships, others went ashore and invaded Daylam. What happened next is described by Ibn Isfandiyar, who writes that “people from Gilyan came down to the shore and set fire to the ships there and killed those who were on the shore, while others, who were at sea, escaped. When the king of Shirvanshakh [the emir of Shirvan] was told about this, he ordered them to be waylaid at sea, and in the end none of them remained alive, and thus was put an end to the frequent appearance of the Rus in this land.

A year later, the Rus came back in large numbers, but were eventually driven out. Ibn Isfandiyar writes that “people from Gilyan came down to the shore and set fire to the ships there and killed those who were on the shore, while others, who were at sea, escaped. When king Shirvanshakh [the emir of Shirvan] was told about this, he ordered them to be waylaid at sea, and in the end none of them remained alive, and thus was put an end to the frequent appearance of the Rus in this land.

### **The raid of 913–914**

The most extensive Rus expedition into the Middle East took place in the years 913–914. The circumstances are better known than those of the others, thanks to the account

of al-Masudi, who collected his information from the local inhabitants. According to al-Masudi, this was the first appearance of the Rus on the Caspian and a shock to the local population. This assertion does not necessarily confute the accounts of the previous attacks, since they were affecting only limited areas and may not have been commonly known.

Scholars who have analyzed al-Masudi's account agree that the expedition took place in 913. A fleet consisting of 500 Rus ships, each of which containing a hundred warriors, went into the Gulf of Kerch, then under Khazar control. The Rus contacted the Khazar Kaghan, asking for his permission to go to the Caspian via the Volga, in return offering him half of the future spoils. The kaghan agreed, one of the reasons being that in 909 or 912 the Khazars together with the princes of Dagestan were at war with the Precaspian states of Derbent and Shirvan. From the Don the Rus moved on to the Volga, from where they went down to the Caspian Sea.

Having reached the Caspian, the Rus divided into bands and began to raid cities on the southern shore. Gilan, Deilem, Tabaristan, Abaskun were exposed to their assault. Thereafter the Rus moved on to the western shore, attacking Azerbaijan and Shirvan in a raid al-Masudi describes in the following way:

And the Rus shed blood, took women and children captive, looted property, let lose the horsemen, and burned. The nations living near this sea screamed out in horror, for it had not happened since ancient times that the enemy had attacked them here, where only the ships of merchants and fishermen used to land.

The Rus stopped on the islands opposite Baku, where the king of Shirvan, Ali al-Haitham, summoned the local population and organized an attack on them. They rushed to the islands in small boats and merchant ships, and thousands of Muslims were killed and drowned by the Rus. After this, the Rus remained on the islands "many months", surrounded by tribes that followed them. After that, when it became difficult to carry out raids, the Rus decided to put an end to the campaign and went back to the outlets of the Volga.

When they reached Itil, they fulfilled the conditions of the agreement and handed over to the kaghan his part. The royal guard, however, consisting of Muslims, demanded revenge for their fellow believers. The kaghan was unable to stop them, but he seems to have been able to warn the Rus of the danger. The weakened Rus army went into battle with the Muslims (15 thousand horsemen), who were also joined by

local Christians in the combat on land. The exact place of the battle is not given, but it may be assumed that the Khazar cavalry waylaid the Rus in the area where they had to portage their boats and supplies over to the Don. The battle lasted three days. At the end, 5 thousand Rus managed to get away on their ships up the Volga. The remaining Rus left their ships and went ashore in the land of the Burtas (the western bank on the Middle Volga), where they were totally exterminated by the Burtas and the Volga Bulgars.

All in all, according to al-Masudi, the number of killed Rus amounted to 30 thousand, and from that time until 943 (the year al-Masudis works were written), nothing more was heard about Rus attacks on the Caspian.

### **The raid of 943–945**

The second large-scale raid is that of 943–945. Before the Rus set out this time, they had engaged with the Khazars in a conflict described in the so-called Cambridge document or Schechter Letter. Around 939 a Rus ruler H–L–G–W (Helgu, probably Oleg) had been bribed by the Byzantines to seize the Khazar fortress controlling the straits of Kerch. They were expelled from the fortress by the Khazar commander Pesakh, who went on to attack and defeat H–L–G–W. According to the Khazar account, Pesakh compelled the Rus to go to war against Constantinople. After the failure of the campaign that lasted four months (the Rus ships were set alight by Greek fire), H–L–G–W seems to have been too ashamed to return to his homeland and with his retinue (дружина) he departed for Persia.

The attack on Byzantium coincides with Igor Riurikovich's unsuccessful attack on Byzantium in 941, but with whom H–L–G–W should be identified remains an open question.

The raid into the Precaspian countries in 943/45, referred to in the Cambridge document without any dates, has been described in some detail by eastern authors recording the events. The Persian historian Ibn Miskaveyh (932-1030) dates the raid to 943/944, whereas Bar-‘Ebrāyā (Bar Hebræus), the thirteenth-century catholicos of the Syriac Orthodox Church, writes that the raid took place “in the same year when Mustakfi became king [kalif of the Abbasid dynasty], that is in 944/945.

The main target of the Rus raid was the prosperous city of Berdaa (Bərdə), the former capital of Caucasian Albania (Arran), situated where the river Kura (Mtkvari) flows into Azerbaijan. The Rus, up to 3000 men in all, easily defeated the small garrison that came towards them together with a small reinforcement of five thousand

men that had been assembled in all haste. Thereafter they seized Berdaa. They did not plunder the city, but announced to the local population that they would guarantee their safety and religious freedom, if only they would surrender. Sympathizers were only found among the aristocracy, however, whereas the bulk of the population refused to surrender. Then the troops (up to 30 thousand) of the Deylam governor of Azerbaijan, Marzuban ibn Mukhammad, arrived and besieged the city, but he was unable to oust the Rus. In order to suppress the unrest among the natives, the Rus propose that all who wished to do so could leave the city in three days. Only those who possessed pack animals accepted. On the expiration of the date, the Rus killed a great part of the natives, incarcerated until 10 thousand in the fortress and offered them the chance to redeem themselves. Those who were unable or unwilling to do so were killed by the Rus.

Because of the revolt of insurgents in the south, Marzuban had to take his army into Syria, leaving 4 thousand men for the blockade of Berdaa. Epidemic dysentery with a high mortality broke out in the Rus camp, and they decided to leave. Exhausted by the disease and the siege, the Rus “by night left the fortress in which they had established their quarters, carrying on their backs all they could of their treasure, gems, and fine raiment, boys and girls as they wanted, and made for the Kura River, where the ships in which they had issued from their home were in readiness with their crews, and 300 Russes whom they had been supporting with portions of their booty” (Vernadsky 1959, 269). The Rus spent half a year in all in Berdaa, leaving it deserted and devastated.

### **The destruction Khazaria in the 960s**

Around 950–960, the Khazar ruler Joseph, in a letter to Hasdai ibn Shafrut, foreign secretary to the Caliph of Cordoba, described his role as defender of the Muslim polities of the Caspian region against Rus incursions. He had to wage war with them, he wrote, preventing them access to Derbent by land and by sea. For if he didn’t, they would lay waste the whole land of the Muslims as far as Baghdad (Barthold 1996).

The sources are not clear about the roots of the conflict between Khazaria and Rus. A main reason seems to have been that the Rus had an interest in removing the Khazar hold on the strait of Kerch and the Don river valley, as well their control of the Volga trade. Moreover, it seems that Byzantine incitement also played a role.

The war broke out when Sviatoslav Igorevich soon after his accession to the throne in Kiev launched a campaign in order to expand Rus control over the Volga valley and the Pontic steppe region. The course of the war may be reconstructed from several

different accounts. There may have been one extensive campaign, beginning in 965, led by Sviatoslav, or two, the first in 965, when the Rus captured Sarkel—from this time the Rus city of Belaia Vezha—subjected the Alans and the Kasogians, plundered Itil and Semender, another important Khazar city on the Caspian, and the territory higher up on the Volga, the land of the Burtas and the Bulgars. The Khazar population panicked and tried to escape by hiding on the islands. The kaghan's court left the capital. The outcome of the campaign was the total destruction of Khazaria.

After this, the Rus principality of Tmutokan was established on the Taman peninsula. The principality also included the Kerch peninsula and survived until the beginning of the twelfth century. Khazar rule on the Volga was re-established in the 970s with the support of Shirvan and Khorezm. In return, the Khazar nobility had to renounce their Jewish religion and accept Islam. In 985, Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich undertook a campaign against Khazaria and imposed tax on its people. Soon after, Khazaria ceased to exist as a state.

### **The raid of 987**

The campaign of 987 came about when the Rus were asked to support Maymun, emir of Derbent, in his struggle with his own nobility. The author of *The History of Shirvan and Derbent* does not say anything about where the Rus came from in order to assist the emir. Information provided by Old-Armenian historians allows us to assume that they may have been Byzantine mercenaries in South-Caucasus. One of them, Stefan of Taron, a contemporary of Prince Vladimir, gives an account of a quarrel about an armful of hay in the camp of the Byzantine army (in Armenia in 1000) between Rus and Iberians (Georgians):

Then all the people of Rus who were there rose to fight; there were 6000 of them—foot soldiers, armed with spears and shields—whom Emperor Basil had solicited from the king of Rus at the time when he gave his sister in marriage to the latter. At the same time, the Rus believed in Christ (Braychevsky 1989).

### **The raid of 1030–1032**

In their last recorded campaign in the Shirvan region, the Rus first assailed in 1030 Shirvan on 38 ships that the ruler of Shirvan, Manūčihir ben Yazid met at Baku. In the battle that followed, the army of the Shirvanshakh was destroyed and the Rus moved on to the Kura (Mtkvari) river and then to the Aras, where Manūčihir tried to stop them



once more, but was again beaten on the river. The ruler of Ganja, Musa ben Fadl, hired the Rus for his internal struggle with his brother, whose supporters had taken Bajlakan. With Rus help Musa took control over Bajlakal and killed his brother, whereas the Rus, according to the chronicle, returned to Rum (Byzantium) and then to their own country. (V. F. Minorskii, the editor of the translation of “The History of Shirvan and Derbent”, suggests that the Rus might have gone to the west of the Caucasus, controlled by the Byzantines, and subsequently left for Tmutorokan.)

### **Vikings in South-Caucasus**

The presence of Vikings in South-Caucasus is mentioned by Old Armenian historians. The active participation of a Viking army in the struggle against the Seljuk Sultan Tukhril Bek in 1054 is recorded by the eleventh-century historian Aristakes Lastivertci, who calls the Rus “prank”, meaning “Vikings”, according to modern scholarship (Atadzhanyan, I. A. 2006: 39). If the Rus in South-Caucasus were Vikings, their route to Rus through Byzantium finds its explanation. In that case, the reinforcement granted by the Rus to various rulers in the Caucasus may be due either to the private initiative of Rus mercenary bands, or a manifestation of Byzantine policies in the region.

### **The raid of 1074**

The authenticity of this raid is usually denied, the reason being that the source of the information is a poem by the Persian poet Khāqāni Shirvani (1121–1190), a native of Shirvan. According to his words, during the reign of the Shirvanshakh (the ruler of Shirvan) Akhsitan ibn Minuchihr the Rus in 1074 on 73 ships sailed up the Kura to Lemberan. At the same time, Alans and Polovtsians captured Derbent and moved southwards to Shirvan. Shirvanshakh turned for help to the Georgian king Georg II, who was his father-in-law, and to the Byzantine emperor. By combined efforts they defeated the Rus before Baku. The Alans and the Polovtsians were beaten as well.

### **Vikings in the battle of Sasireti (1047)**

A similar destiny has befallen the legendary *Yngvars saga víðförla* dated to the 1040s. The saga is a mixture of legend and historical facts. Its authenticity has been contested and describes the last recorded expedition of the Vikings into the Caspian, led by its hero, Yngvarr víðförla, who went down the Volga and into the land of the Saracens. Its special significance in our context is its possible link with the Georgian-Byzantine battle of Sasireti (in today’s Shida Kartli) in 1047. Here, the army of King Bagrat IV

was joined by a Varangian detachment of 700 men, assumed to be a subdivision of Ingvar's expedition. According to the Georgian *kartlis tsovreba Chronicle*, they had landed at Bashi by the mouth of the river Phasis (Rioni) in western Georgia.

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