

# CROSS ROADS

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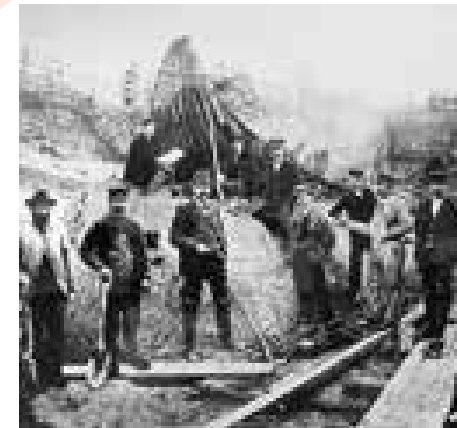


### IN BUKHARA

The Ark of Bukhara is a massive fortress in the city of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, and was built in the 5th century AD. Ibn Fadlan must have visited this complex during his stay in Bukhara, since the fortress not only served as a military structure but also encompassed the royal court. The Ark was used as a fortress until it fell to Russia in 1920. At present the Ark is a tourist attraction and houses museums covering its history.

neighbouring Khazars, an equestrian people that had converted to Judaism and to which the Volga Bulgars owed tribute.

In the summer of 921 the embassy made first for Bukhara (Uzbekistan), then the capital of the Samanid Empire, where they made unsuccessful attempts to exact the tribute the khan had been promised as financial support. From Bukhara they sailed down the Oxus (now the Amudarya) to Jurjaniya (Gurganj, now Kunya-Urgench) in the province of Chorasmia/Khorezm south of the Aral Sea. As the cold set in, the embassy had to spend the winter there, and many participants preferred returning to Baghdad. The next spring they continued their journey to Bolghar through the territories of the Oghuz Turks and the Pechenegs (Kazakhstan) along the Caspian Sea. In May 922 the embassy reached Bolghar. Ibn Fadlan gives a perceptive impression of the reception by the khan, the strange customs and the Volga Bulgars' attempts to stick to the Islamic precepts, which were new to them. When it



### THE OSEBERG SHIP BURIAL

Many of the details Ibn Fadlan describes regarding a Rus leader's funeral correspond to what we know about Viking funeral rites from archaeological finds in Scandinavia. This includes high-status Vikings being buried in a ship (as was the case with the two women whose ship grave was found at Oseberg, Norway; excavation picture from 1904) or burnt with a ship or boat.



turned out that he could not give Khan Almish the promised financial support, his mission hung by a thread—but although the khan felt that Ibn Fadlan had deceived him, a friendly understanding between the two men developed that was marked by exchanges of puns over the missing financial support, with Almish calling Ibn Fadlan 'Abu Bakr the Truthful', a reference to the seventh-century caliph who allegedly was unable to lie.

In Bolghar the Arab diplomat first met the Rus, who used its market as a transfer hub for trade with the Orient. Much impressed by their looks, he wrote that he had never seen more perfect bodies and that they were tall as palm trees. He described in detail how they looked, their clothes and weapons, the women's jewellery and their religious beliefs. But he was appalled by their customs and particularly by their lack of personal hygiene, calling them 'the filthiest of God's creatures' and 'like wandering donkeys'. The Rus' liberated sexual behaviour, which he mentions repeatedly, appears to have annoyed him greatly.

### THE VARANGIAN WAY

The Rus, also called the Varangians, established a trade network that extended from the dense forests of present-day north-west Russia to the Caspian Sea. Along the two central rivers Volga and Dnieper, the Rus could sail their longships from the Baltic to the trade hubs of Atil and Bolghar; over the Black Sea they reached Constantinople (now Istanbul), heart of the Byzantine Empire. Painting by Nicholas Roerich, 1904.

Ibn Fadlan's powerful eyewitness report of a Rus funeral in Bolghar is unique. Some of the rites he describes are otherwise unknown, but the funeral type—cremation on a ship and human and animal sacrifice—corresponds to Viking funeral rites known from finds in Scandinavia. Discrepancies between his report and other historical or archaeological sources on Vikings and Rus may stem from the fact that the Rus he met had already adopted certain elements of other cultures. Ibn Fadlan's travelogue is considered a trustworthy and valuable source on the steppe peoples' pre-Islamic culture and on ancient Russian history. His astute and objective observations contain a wealth of information on the cultures he encountered on his journey of over 2,800 miles; on the culture of the Oghuz Turks for instance, who later founded the Ottoman Empire. The *Risala* also reveals the character of its author: curious about foreign peoples, educated and with a sense of humour. Ibn Fadlan bore the hardships of his mission with equanimity, complaining only once of the cold freezing his beard solid. Unfortunately we know nothing more about him, not even the years of his birth and death or his profession at the caliph's court. Nor do we know what happened after the events described in the *Risala*, which is incomplete—but the mention of a longer, probably complete version by a later Arab scholar justifies the belief that Ibn Fadlan returned safely to Baghdad.

### TRAVELLER

# AHMAD IBN FADLAN'S RISALA

## AN ARAB DIPLOMAT'S TRAVELOGUE

Matthias Toplak

Hardly any historical source has shaped the image of the Vikings and stirred the imagination like the description of a Viking (called Rus in eastern Europe) funeral ceremony by the tenth-century Arab diplomat Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-Abbas ibn Rashid ibn Hammad (dates of birth and death unknown). Ibn Fadlan was part of an embassy from the Abbasid caliph Abu l-Fadl al-Muqtadir (r. AD 895–932), residing in Baghdad (Iraq), to the khan of the Volga Bulgars. They were a seminomadic, Turkic-speaking people whose seat of power was

Bolghar on the Upper Volga (Russia). Ibn Fadlan wrote about the journey—during which he also encountered Rus merchants—in a report that was later entitled *Risala* (Arabic 'letter', 'report'). The mission was occasioned by a request from Khan Almish ibn Yiltawar (r. AD 895–925), who had converted to Islam with his court and asked the caliph of Baghdad for instruction in Islamic precepts and for help in building a mosque. The khan's conversion undoubtedly had something to do with the possibility of a political alliance with the powerful caliphate against the