

continuing to Bagdad on camel caravans.

It's a distance of over 5,000 kilometres.

Visiting Turkish-ruled countries

Scandinavians were encountered in the eastern regions of the Continent for centuries. They were warriors, merchants and common labourers.

Some sources mention Vikings working as caravan guards – mercenary soldiers.

“Archaeological sources placed Vikings further west, but Arabs mainly confronted them closer to the Caspian Sea. This was a completely different cultural setting, one governed by Turks,” explains Jonsson Hraundal.

Turks are an ethnic group who include the people of modern Turkey, but many other peoples as well. Like Mongolians they descend from the Ural Altaic ethnic group.

“The Turks, and especially the Khazars and Bulgars, were the dominant powers in the region when the Rus arrived. The texts mainly show how powerful the Turks were. The Rus couldn't just come in swinging their swords and take over,” says the historian.

Good looking, filthy and crazy

The aforementioned writer Ahmad ibn Fadlan was not fully repulsed by the Scandinavians he met:

I have never seen more perfect physiques than theirs – they are like palm trees, are fair and reddish, and do not wear the tunic or the caftan.

Ahmad ibn Fadlan describes funeral rites which generally conform to the Norse rituals of Scandinavia, but were very exotic for an Islamic intellectual:

In the case of a rich man, they gather together his possessions and divide them into three portions, one third for his household, one third with which to cut funeral garments for him, and one third with which they ferment alcohol which they drink on the day when his slave-girl kills herself and is burned together with her master.

Contemporary Arabic descriptions

It's no news that the Vikings travelled eastwards. But archaeologists and historians have few sources detailing the travels. In Norway, for instance, written material about the journeys dates from long after the trips ended. This undermines the validity of the texts as historical source material.

The archaeologists have thus concentrated on artefacts from Byzantium, in present-day Turkey, and from Slavic areas such as Hungary.

“However, Muslim authors also travelled and met Scandinavian merchants. They made note of these episodes at the time they occurred,” says the historian Jonsson Hraundal.

This makes them excellent first-hand sources regarding the kind of people the Rus were.

Silver coins testify to contacts

For a number of reasons, the East-bound Vikings have been neglected by scholars in comparison to those who headed west. Political problems hampered Western archaeologists for decades. During much of the 20th century it was hard for West European researchers to access artefacts collected behind the Iron Curtain.

“We have a lot more source information from the West because of the linguistic and writing culture that dominated there,” adds Archaeology Professor Jan Bill of the University of Oslo.

“This doesn’t mean that the contact in the East was unimportant, but perhaps we haven’t had as much opportunity to study it.”

There are exceptions and Bill mentions that Arab silver coins and other artefacts from Kazakhstan and neighbouring areas have been found at Heimdalsjordet, a former marketplace not far from the Gokstad Viking Ship Mound in Sandefjord, southwest of Oslo.

“They come from the Silk Road and show that the Vikings definitely had contact with Islamic areas,” he says.

Deserving more emphasis

Another barrier is that the Arabic texts lack names for the Scandinavians they described, unlike many of the Western sources. The Arabs have evidently viewed them as a homogenous group, and haven’t considered the name of any incidental northern “infidel” relevant to the travel journals they wrote.

This makes the protagonists anonymous and for historians perhaps a little less enticing to study.

Jonsson Hraundal hopes his doctoral thesis can help open up more studies of what the Vikings did in the East.

“The Scandinavians who travelled eastwards are generally mentioned briefly in passing by textbooks and in school. I think this part of our history should be given much more attention,” he says.

[Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no](#) [8]

 [The Polish painter Henryk Siemiradzki painted the funeral ritual of Vikings in what is now Russia, in accordance with descriptions by Ahmad ibn Fadlan. New analyses show that his and other Arabs? texts are excellent sources of cultural knowledge about the Vikings who ventured eastward. \(Photo: Wikimedia Creative Commons\)](#) [9]

 [The coloured area indicates the Khazars? territory, one of the regions where travelling Arab writers describe having met Vikings. \(Image: Wikimedia Creative Commons\)](#) [10]

 [In the manuscripts from Ahmad ibn Fadlan and others, Jonsson Hraundal has extracted some new knowledge about how Vikings behaved in the East. \(Photo: Gilwellian/Wikimedia Creative Commons\)](#) [11]

 [Thorir Jonsson Hraundal \(Photo: UiB\)](#) [12]

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