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From Raiders to Traders: The Viking-Arab Trade Exchange

Susanne Watts

The Viking raids across Europe brought them into contact with other cultures, including Muslim Arabs. Although there are no known Viking settlements in the Arab lands, both cultures interacted with each other through their respective exploration of Europe. Contact between Vikings and Arabs occurred mainly in the area of what would become Russia. While there is scarce evidence that Arabs visited the homelands of the Vikings, or as they called them, the “people of the North,” artifacts found across Scandinavia, and especially in Sweden, point to an extensive long-distance trade exchange between the two very different cultures. It was the promise of access to much needed and coveted silver that set off the Viking exploration into Europe, and brought Viking raiders into contact with the Arabs. In their quest for silver, the Vikings discovered and accessed valuable trade routes to Constantinople that led to an extensive trade exchange with the Arab world. Seizing upon the opportunity to enrich themselves, the Vikings came into contact with Arabic wealth and treasures through their raids, and soon realized the potential of a peaceful trade exchange.

The Vikings came into contact with Muslim Arabs during their exploration of the Iberian Peninsula. One of the first contacts occurred with Muslim Spain in 844 when a Viking fleet of fifty-four ships sailed from their base in Brittany to Spain in order to raid the Caliphate’s treasures.¹ The raiding campaign was successful, as the Vikings conquered Lisbon and Seville, destroyed numerous other towns, and even threatened the capital of al-Andalus, Córdoba. However, the Muslims were able to drive back the Viking invaders and built “an effective coastal defence against new attacks.”² Having seen the riches of the Caliphate, the Vikings were determined to return, and embarked on a second raiding campaign in 859, this time with a much bigger fleet of sixty-two ships. Again, the raiding campaign itself was a success, as their ships were “so fully laden with plunder that they sat low in the water.”³ However, on the Vikings’ journey back to their home base in Brittany, the Muslim naval fleet attacked and destroyed the majority of the Vikings’ ships. With that, Viking exploration of and interaction with Muslim Spain ended. The two raids gave both cultures a first glimpse at each other’s military capabilities and characteristics. Prior to the Vikings’ invasion of

the Caliphate, the Arabs had no interaction with the “people of the North.” To the Muslim Arabs, the Vikings appeared “as a sudden, mysterious, military threat.”⁴ The Vikings for the first time were confronted with an enemy that was well organized on land as well as on the sea, where Vikings were used to supremacy.

Viking interaction with the people of Eastern Europe, particularly those in the area around the Volga River, was markedly different from their encounters in Muslim Spain. For one, the Vikings, called Varangians by the Slavs, would establish permanent settlements there, and would later be identified as the *Rus*, giving the name to the land that would be eventually known as Russia. It was this contact that would set the stage for future trade exchange and extensive long-distance trading with the Arabic world, as well as the Viking-*Rus*’ exploration into Byzantium. According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, at the same time the Vikings launched their second raiding campaign in Muslim Spain in 859, “Varangians from beyond the sea imposed tribute upon the Slavs.”⁵ However, while the Slavs successfully dispelled the Vikings, they were unable to establish a stable government, forcing them to “seek a prince who may rule over [them] and judge [them] according to the Law.”⁶ Thus, they looked to the Varangians to provide strong leadership and rule over them. However, even before they were invited back to establish law and order over the Slavs, Swedish Vikings had established a presence in the area, and established trading contacts with Arabic merchants across the Caspian Sea. The raiding campaign on Constantinople in 860 by these Swedish Vikings marked the beginning of not only a long-distance trade exchange but also an exchange of military service between the Byzantine Empire and Viking Scandinavia.⁷

The Vikings’ demand for silver was one of the most important factors that influenced their commercial contacts into Russia and Constantinople. Constantinople at the time was one of the world’s most important trading centers, and the Vikings realized the opportunities to amass personal wealth by not only engaging in trade with the empire but by also offering their military service to the Byzantine Emperors. Viking warriors were well respected, and their fighting spirit was legendary. It comes as no surprise then that “the emperors valued the Varangians above all for their loyalty and courage, their fighting qualities and ability to carry out commands efficiently and without questions.”⁸ Service in the Varangian Guard was prestigious as well as profitable. In addition to their regular salary, Varangian Guard soldiers received gifts at the coronation of a new emperor

and they shared in the booty while on military campaign for the empire.⁹

Not only were the Varangians highly regarded in their military service to the Byzantine Emperor, they also received preferential treatment in their commercial trading activities with the empire. It was in Constantinople that the Viking and Arab trade exchange flourished, as the city was regarded a major trading center, bringing together exotic goods from the East and West. The Vikings brought much sought after furs, amber, and slaves to the Byzantines and thus the Arab market. In return, the Vikings received Arab silver coins, silk textiles, and jewelry. Clearly, it appears that the merchandise traded were luxury items intended for the wealthy of both Viking and Arab society.¹⁰ It is thus not surprising that this extensive and expensive trade relationship needed to be regulated and protected. The importance of ensuring safe delivery of the exotic northern merchandise is evident in several agreements, beginning in 907. These agreements not only established the commercial trading relationship between Byzantium and the Varangians, they also aimed to create a permanent peace between the two peoples. In essence, Byzantium awarded the Varangians privileged trading status by regulating the trade, providing insurance for their goods, and awarding generous privileges for the Varangian merchants. The *Kiev Chronicle* mentions several treaties regulating Byzantine-Varangian trade:

If they [Rus'] come as merchants they shall be fed for six months; bread, wine, meat, fish and fruit. Bath shall be prepared for them as often as they wish. When they return to Rus' again, they shall be equipped by our emperor with proviant, anchors, ropes and sails and everything needed.¹¹

These treaties highlight the importance of the evolving long-distance trade relationship between the Varangians, Viking Scandinavia, Byzantium, and the Arabs. Byzantine Constantinople acted as the main trading center in facilitating this international trade relationship.

One important figure of the Varangian trade connection was Harald Sigurdson, also known as Harald Hardrada, who served in the Varangian Guard from around 1030 to 1042.¹² This future King of Norway used his service in Byzantium to amass personal wealth that would allow him to return to his native land and claim the throne in 1046. His adventures are well documented in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, in which he devotes a Saga to the future king. During his

service, Harald travelled across the Byzantine Empire, fighting campaigns in Africa, and the Middle East, as far as Palestine, and amassed a great amount of wealth.¹³ Sturluson reports, Harald “gathered great wealth in gold, jewels, and all sorts of precious things; and all the wealth he gathered there which he did not need for his expenses, he sent with trusty men of his own north to Novgorod to King Jarisleif’s care and keeping.”¹⁴ Harald’s travels reveal a rich history of contact with cultures very different from his own. The wealth he was able to accumulate was eventually transferred to his native land, and used in the Viking practice of gift giving to ensure loyalty and support in order to secure political power. One such exotic gift was “an ingot of gold the size of a man’s head,” which Harald presented to King Magnus upon his return to Norway.¹⁵ Harald exchanged not only exotic treasures from his foreign travels but also stories, thus helping Scandinavians to imagine the world and its diverse cultures beyond their known lands.

While Viking sources are rather scarce on their trading exchange and interaction with the Arabic world, Arabic writers have left a plethora of reports about their encounters with the “people of the North.” It is evident in the written Arabic sources that they observed the Vikings and their customs with great interest. These sources reveal an extensive interaction between the two cultures. For the educated Muslim of the tenth century, only four peoples existed that possessed a civilization of culture: Arabs, Persians, Indians, and the Byzantines, and while Europe was known as a geographical entity the Arabs did not view it as a cultural concept.¹⁶ The Muslim Arabs certainly acknowledged the existence of other peoples, however “the centre of the world was the lands of Islam, stretching from Spain across North Africa to the Middle East.”¹⁷ Several writers of the ninth and tenth century however give detailed descriptions of the northern region, its people as well as its flora and fauna. Al-Bīrūnī reports that the people living in the far northern region use wooden sleds and skis for travel through the snow-covered plains.¹⁸ Prior to the expansion of Islam into Europe there was also little interaction with other ethnic groups, and even after the establishment of the al-Andalus Caliphate the Muslim Arabs were not too interested in the northern lands. According to the Arab worldview, the “people of the North” did not concern themselves with science, thus they were of little interest to the Arabs who considered themselves intellectually as well as culturally superior.¹⁹ Overall, the Varangians had little to offer to the learned Muslim Arabs.

At the time of the Viking raids in Spain, Muslim Arabs had very little

knowledge about the seafaring raiders. The Viking invasion of Spain in 844 marked one of the first contacts between the two cultures. Arabic writers recorded the Viking invasion, noting that the fire-worshipping ‘al-Majus (al-Rus) “took captives, slaughtered, burnt and plundered.”²⁰ This first interaction certainly helped to reinforce the Arabs’ perception of the uncivilized Vikings. While contact with the Vikings was limited to raids in Western Europe, Arabs had a greater opportunity in Eastern Europe to interact with the Vikings. Arabs did not seem to be interested in travelling to Scandinavia in order to conduct trade although the Spanish Arab al-Tartuschi reported that the Danish trading center of Hedeby was poor and dirty.²¹ Due to the importance of the Byzantine trade exchange Viking merchants were a common sight in Constantinople in the late ninth and tenth century, thus interacting with Arab merchants. The trade exchange benefitted both: Arabs desired Viking furs and weapons, and the Vikings were in need of silver in the form of Arabic coins and jewelry. However, Arabs also observed Vikings in their settlements. One of the better-known accounts is that of Ibn Fadlan, an Arab chronicler who was sent to the King of the Bulgars of the Middle Volga by the Caliph of Baghdad in 921.²² Ibn Fadlan’s report is remarkable in that it is a first-hand account by an Arab observing the Viking *Rus*’ in their everyday life. He admires their perfect physiques just like the Byzantine Emperors admired the physical strength of their Varangian Guards. What is of great value and helped reinforce the Arabs’ view of the culturally inferior Vikings is Ibn Fadlan’s detailed observations of the *Rus*’ life. Ibn Fadlan calls them “the filthiest of Allah’s creatures,” and is appalled by their lack of hygiene.²³ He then describes in great detail various aspects of the *Rus*’ customs, paying particular attention to their funeral and burial practices, which appear to be very foreign to the Arab chronicler. Overall, the account elucidates the differences between the two cultures. It must have been a culture shock for Ibn Fadlan to experience Viking *Rus*’ life, however his report also provides invaluable information about the interaction between the two cultures outside the commercial trade exchange. Subsequent Arab reports on the Vikings corroborate Ibn Fadlan’s observations, indicating a long lasting and extensive interaction between the two peoples.

What is missing in the Viking-Arab trade exchange discussion is evidence of written Viking sources describing the contact and interaction between the two peoples. There are no Viking accounts available similar to Ibn Fadlan’s report on the *Rus*’ that could provide insight to how the Vikings perceived the Arabs and their

customs. There is however evidence of long-distance travel and trade on memorial stones or rune stones, with the majority of them occurring in Sweden. The inscriptions tell of travels to Greece to obtain precious metals, as well as travels to the Middle East, mentioning Jerusalem and the land of the Saracens.²⁴ Equally missing from the discussion are Viking artifacts in Arab lands, which would indicate a one-sided trade exchange. However, through Arab written sources it is clear that goods such as furs and weapons were highly sought after by the Arabs. A lack of archaeological evidence does not automatically preclude the existence of trade relations. There is, however a plethora of Arabic and Islamic artifacts in Scandinavia, especially in Sweden. This in turn supports the idea that Swedish Vikings traveled eastwards, established settlements in the Volga region of Russia, and engaged in an extensive trading network with the Arabs via Byzantium. This eastward exploration was spurred by the Vikings' quest for silver. As Wladyslaw Duczko states, "For the Northmen the Islamic silver was the main object of exchange. It was in exchange of this metal that a variety of goods was delivered to the East."²⁵ In return, the Vikings acquired a rich selection of diverse goods from the East that they brought back to their respective settlements in Russia as well as Scandinavia.

The great majority of Arabic and Islamic artifacts found in Scandinavia were silver coins. Scandinavia was not a silver-producing region, thus devoid of natural occurrences of the precious metal. In Sweden alone, 80,000 dirhams have been found, with the great majority of them dating to the ninth and tenth century, indicating the intensity of the long-distance trade exchange during the *Rus'* first contact with Byzantium.²⁶ These silver coin hoards also show how important the precious metal was to Swedish society in particular. The chieftains were "in constant need of silver to maintain their societal position," which meant that "silver was very useful as an economical-political means and was a significant factor in the shaping of the emerging Swedish state."²⁷ Thus, the importance of the silver coin hoards cannot be underestimated. The coveted silver coins were used to ensure chieftains' political power and influence. Gift giving in general was an important practice in Viking society, as chieftains and men of high social standing used the custom to secure and expand their political position in exchange for loyalty and support.

The practice of gift giving was not limited to silver coins. As the Sagas report, exotic items from foreign lands were greatly desired, and used to enhance a

person's status or ensure allegiance for a leader. These exotic items are further proof of an extensive long-distance relationship with Byzantium. Snorri Sturluson mentions how "unusual splendour and foreign customs and fashions" were a regular sight at the Norwegian kings' court.²⁸ While Arabic and Islamic silver coins represent the majority of artifacts in Sweden that indicate an extensive trade relationship with the Arab world, other items point to the rich diversity of the trade exchange. Although silver was in high demand in Scandinavia, more personal Arabic objects have been found, including a bronze incense burner, an oil lamp, fine glassware, silk textiles, as well as intact pieces of oriental jewelry, such as a silver amethyst ring with the Arabic inscription *in the name of Allah*.²⁹

Evidence in written Arabic sources, Viking Sagas, as well as archeological artifacts in Scandinavia point to an extensive trade relationship between Vikings and Arabs. The Vikings' need for silver spurred their exploration eastward, and established a far-reaching trade exchange that went beyond their quest for the precious metal. The Vikings' development from raiders to traders can be traced in this long-distance trade relationship. In their quest for silver, the Vikings eventually reached the great trading center of Constantinople, bringing them in contact with diverse cultures. This in turn started a far-reaching trade exchange that impacted not only the lives of the Viking merchants but also brought the exotic world of Byzantium and Muslim Arabs to the "people of the North."

Notes

1. Neil Price, "The Vikings in Spain, North Africa and the Mediterranean," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink in collaboration with Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2012), 463.

2. Else Roesdahl and Anne Kromann, "The Vikings and the Islamic lands," in *The Arabian Journey: Danish Connections with the Islamic World over a Thousand Years*, ed. Kjeld von Folsach, Torben Lundbæk, Peder Mortensen (Århus: Prehistoric Museum Moesgård, 1996), 12.

3. Price, "The Vikings in Spain, North Africa and the Mediterranean," 466.

4. Amira K. Bennison, "The Peoples of the North in the Eyes of the Muslims of Umayyad al-Andalus (711-1031)," *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 2 (Jul 2007): 171.

5. *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, trans. and ed. Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), 6.

6. *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 7.

7. S. H. Cross, "The Scandinavian Infiltration into Early Russia," *Speculum* 21, no. 4 (Oct., 1946): 506.

8. H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1976), 185.
9. *Ibid.*, 182.
10. Elisabeth Piltz, "Varangian Companies for Long Distance Trade," in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia*, ed. Elisabeth Piltz (Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998), 99.
11. *The Kiev Chronicle*, in Elisabeth Piltz, "Varangian Companies for Long Distance Trade," in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia*, ed. Elisabeth Piltz (Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998), 89.
12. H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium*, 211.
13. Snorri Sturluson, "Saga of Harald Hardrade," in *Heimskringla The Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, ed. Douglas B. Killings, 1996, Project Gutenberg Etext, 11-12.
14. *Ibid.*, 5.
15. H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium*, 227.
16. Gotthard Strohmaier, "Arabische Autoren des Mittelalters über die Nordvölker," in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia*, ed. Elisabeth Piltz, trans. Susanne Watts (Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998), 59-60.
17. Bernard Lewis, "The Muslim Discovery of Europe," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 20, no. 1/3, Studies in Honour of Sir Ralph Turner, Director of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 1937-57 (1957): 409.
18. Gotthard Strohmaier, "Arabische Autoren des Mittelalters über die Nordvölker," 62.
19. Bernard Lewis, "The Muslim Discovery of Europe," 409-411.
20. J. E. Montgomery, "Arabic Sources on the Vikings," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink in collaboration with Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2012), 552.
21. Egil Mikkelsen, "The Vikings and Islam," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink in collaboration with Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2012), 543.
22. "Risala: Ibn Fadlan's Account of the Rus," Viking Expansion, Raids, Trade, and Settlements in the Viking Age, *The Viking Answer Lady*, http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/ibn_fdlm.shtml.
23. Ibn Fadlan, "Risala," in James E. Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyah," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000): 7.
24. Elisabeth Piltz, "Varangian Companies for Long Distance Trade," 86-87.
25. Wladyslaw Duczko, "Viking Age Scandinavia and Islam," in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia*, ed. Elisabeth Piltz (Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998), 107.
26. Elisabeth Piltz, "Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia," in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia*, ed. Elisabeth Piltz (Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998), 29.
27. Wladyslaw Duczko, "Viking Age Scandinavia and Islam," 107.

28. Snorri Sturluson, "Saga of Olaf Kyrre," in *Heimskringla The Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, ed. Douglas B. Killings, 1996, Project Gutenberg Etext, 2.

29. Wladyslaw Duczko, "Viking Age Scandinavia and Islam," 111-114.

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Susanne Watts is a native German, who moved to the United States in March 1994 to marry her then-soldier husband, Sean. As a child of the Cold War she lived through some of its hot periods. Growing up a mere ten miles from the former East-German border, her West-German hometown is located in the famous Fulda Gap, near OP Alpha. Susanne graduated from American Public University with a BA in History in November 2014 and is currently contemplating graduate school. Her historical interests include Germany from 1871 to 1933, the US Gilded Age through the 1920s, the Great War, and the history of the Cold War – particularly as it pertains to her hometown area. Susanne and Sean currently share an abode with their Rubenesque feline, Rugby. The three live in North Carolina, the Old North State.