

## ПО СЛЕДАМ ИБН ФАДЛАНА

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IBN FADLAN'S REPORT ON THE RUS, GOG AND MAGOG  
IN LIGHT OF RECENT WORK ON THE MASHHAD MISCELLANY

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**Abstract:** *The fullest extant text of Ibn Fadlan's Risala, kept at Mashhad in Iran, is well-known in facsimile although the manuscript awaits full codicological investigation. Recent work on the manuscript's other texts has reappraised the 'Mashhad Miscellany' as a whole, notably the role of the poet and traveller Abu Dulaf, and suggested that that Ibn Fadlan's text was written in less formal Middle Arabic. This prompts five general observations. Firstly, given the turbulence in the Caliphate's central lands, Ibn Fadlan can have had little expectation of returning to Baghdad from his mission to the Volga. Secondly, his text is essentially an apologia for failure – and a kind of 'job application'. Thirdly, he offers firsthand information about the peoples of Gog and Magog and the Rus, both of concern to Muslim scholars and leaderships: the former for their liability to break out and herald the End Time; the latter for their recent, devastating raids on the Southern and Eastern Caspian. Fourthly, he may well offer reassurance that, for all their barbarism, the Rus should not be identified with Gog and Magog, while indirectly advocating peaceful coexistence with the Khazars, despite rivalries and religious differences. And fifthly, eyewitness descriptions of a giant from Gog and Magog and of the Rus would have been of particular interest to emirs in the Caspian region – the front line for potential breakouts or raids – as also to those in the Samanid dominions. Ibn Fadlan's may have composed his 'job application' with an eye to these potential employers.*

**Keywords:** Abbasids, Caspian, Gog and Magog, Ibn Fadlan, Mashhad, Middle Arabic, raid, Rus, Samanids, trade

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Considering that Ibn Fadlan offers a unique eyewitness report of Islamic belief, customs and devotions among the peoples living between the Aral Sea and the Middle Volga in the early tenth century, one might expect the manuscript containing the fullest version of his text to have undergone careful scrutiny. This, however, is not the case. There has been no scholarly examination of the manuscript itself since Z.V. Togan discovered the manuscript in the Imam Reza shrine's library at Mashhad in 1923; he subsequently edited and published the text [Togan, 1939]. Although clear facsimiles have been made, study of the folios and the bindings – full codicological analysis – has not yet been done [Treadwell, 2020, p. 46–48; 2022]. Consequently, the dating of the Mashhad manuscript remains uncertain, while surprisingly little attention has been paid to the makeup of its contents as a whole. Of the four texts transmitted by the manuscript the ones with which it begins and ends – respectively al-Faqih's *Kitāb al-Buldān* ('Book of Countries') and Ibn Fadlan's *Risala* ('Message') – have

attracted much study. In comparison, the two shorter texts in the middle purporting to be travelogues, written by the poet and traveller Abu Dulaf, have been overlooked. The same goes for the linking passages, attributable to the self-styled compilers and editors of the Mashhad Miscellany (working in the second half of the tenth century). The travelogues and the linking passages have attracted little comment since that of the mid-twentieth-century authority on (and editor of) Ibn Fadlan, A.P. Kovalevsky [Kovalevskii, 1956, p. 46–47].

Two findings made in connection with a project devoted to Ibn Fadlan may alter the picture somewhat. Firstly, James Montgomery has, on the strength of his new edition and translation of Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*, postulated that the original text was written partly in a register lower than the classical Arabic one would expect of a polished literary text or a diplomatic report. Much of it is, he suggests, in 'Middle Arabic', the less formal register that was normally used for the spoken word [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 182–183; Montgomery, 2022]. Secondly, Luke Treadwell has added to pre-existing scholarly doubts about the veracity of two texts in the Mashhad Miscellany recounting the purported travels of Abu Dulaf, written by him in the first person. Treadwell reaffirms the scepticism that Abu Dulaf's second travelogue – an itinerary across the Southern Caucasus and Iran, much of it to do with mineralogy, flora and folktales about natural phenomena – has long incurred from scholars [Treadwell, 2020, p. 49, 55, 58–60, 67–68]. In a study entitled 'Who compiled and edited the Mashhad Miscellany?', Treadwell goes further than this, casting serious doubt on the historicity of Abu Dulaf's accompaniment of a Samanid embassy to the East, recounted in his first travelogue. He also rejects the authenticity of the scholarly notes purportedly written by the so-called compilers and editors of the Miscellany. The notes linking the four texts and the critical comments on them are, he suggests, the handiwork of Abu Dulaf, 'a notorious itinerant entertainer', 'playing tricks on his audience and his patrons' [Treadwell, 2020, p. 49–51, 59–60, 65]. The notes, together with the travelogues written in Abu Dulaf's name and perhaps even aspects of the *Risala* of Ibn Fadlan form, in Treadwell's view, part of an elaborate literary hoax. The presence of 'the three unknown texts' together in the Mashhad Miscellany is the product of 'a single mind', Abu Dulaf's [Treadwell, 2020, p. 59–60, 68–69]. Only the text of al-Faqih's 'Book of Countries' is transmitted in something like the form its author intended.

Work on this revisionist thesis is still underway. Treadwell recognises that, so far as the Rus are concerned, modern scholars' confidence in the accuracy of Ibn Fadlan's report rests on its corroboration by 'recently discovered archaeological and ethnographic data' [Treadwell, 2020, p. 53]. He accepts that Abu Dulaf, in an effort to make his literary hoax more plausible, did draw upon some authentic materials. To that extent, his thesis about the *Risala* of Abu Dulaf and Abu Dulaf's responsibility for the Mashhad Miscellany does not seriously diminish its value in providing an eyewitness account of the Rus on the Volga. And, anyway, a general historian such as myself is hardly qualified to comment on tenth-century Arabic literary styles and conventions. It does, however, seem worth making a couple of remarks about the text, before offering a few general historical observations. Firstly, the question of the interrelationship between Ibn Fadlan's *Risala* and the two travelogues written in Abu Dulaf's name is bedevilled by the question of the style or register in which the latter two texts were originally written. We do not yet know how far Abu Dulaf's travelogues were originally in Middle Arabic, as parts of Ibn Fadlan's *Risala* were, according to James Montgomery: detailed work on their language is yet to be done [Treadwell, 2022]. Until that time there is no really compelling reason to place the *Risala* in the category of virtual fiction. A second remark follows on from Montgomery's postulate that the Middle Arabic register of much of the *Risala* has been obscured by the predisposition of its modern editors to polish up the style to the standard of classical Arabic, on the assumption that no text in a lower register would have been thought worth preserving. This predisposition of editors entails a rather circular argument. Indeed, it raises the question of how many other texts may have undergone

literary polishing, at the hand of premodern copyists or modern editors. One or two other Middle Arabic texts are, in fact, known, and they will receive attention towards the end of this piece. Our main concern, though, is to make a number of general historical observations, some so obvious as to be seldom thought worth making, others linking up sections of Ibn Fadlan's report with the broader historical context, the widespread apprehensions and events occurring around the time of his journey to the Volga Bulgaria.

Here, then, are some general observations. Firstly, Ibn Fadlan's mission to the Volga took place at a time of turbulence in the central lands of the Caliphate, and there is no evidence that he ever returned to Baghdad or reported in person to his lords and patrons there. During the opening phases of Ibn Fadlan's journey, he and his companions risked harassment at the hands of warring emirs, at one point having to hide among other members of their caravan to avoid arrest and perhaps death. Only when they reached the dominions of the Samanids could they travel in reasonable security [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 190–193; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 4; Kennedy, 2022]. No less worryingly for him, during his stay on the Volga in 922 (perhaps stretching into 923) Ibn Fadlan could not have been sure of the situation in Baghdad. Indeed the political volatility at Baghdad probably explains the hesitance of officials in the Samanid realm to cooperate with Ibn Fadlan's party and make over to them the revenues from the estate of the deposed vizier, Ibn al-Furat. The agent managing the estate was able to prevaricate, inducing the highway authorities to arrest the agent who had been sent from Baghdad to take over from him and allot thousands of dinars of estate-revenue to fund Ibn Fadlan's mission [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 190–191, 192–195; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 3, 5–6]. Such hesitance on the officials' was prudent, given that the deposed vizier was still at large in the palace prison, while the current vizier Hamid ibn al-ʿAbbas was well over eighty years old and little more than a figurehead. Real power lay with his deputy, ʿAli ibn ʿIsa. And the latter was arch-rival of Ibn al-Furat [Kennedy, 2022; Bonner, 2010, p. 349–351; van Berkel, 2013, p. 74–75, 78, 84–85; IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 174–175]. In other words, the factious precariousness of any government running the Abbasid administration will have been as obvious to contemporaries like the Samanids as it is to us today. In fact early in 923 Hamid ibn al-ʿAbbas, the vizier whose letter Ibn Fadlan read out before the Volga Bulgar ruler, was dismissed and, for the third time, Ibn al-Furat was reappointed to the vizierate. Not that his return to high office was long-lasting: arrested in June 924, he was executed soon afterwards [Bonner, 2010, p. 351; van Berkel, 2013, p. 72]. The last datable event mentioned by Ibn Fadlan occurred in the *Hejira* year ending in April 923 [IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 58; IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 256–257]. So if, as seems quite likely, his *Risala* dates from around this time, it was probably written far from Baghdad, and without any assurance that Ibn Fadlan's lords and patrons were still in positions of power.

This brings us to a second general observation, no less relevant for being obvious. Ibn Fadlan's mission was a failure, in his own eyes and those of others. It was unable to deliver to the Volga Bulgar ruler Almish any of the money to fund the building of a fortress and a mosque, or to maintain the instructors he had requested. Almish's bitter demands for the money are a leitmotif of Ibn Fadlan's his stay on the Volga, while the reason for his lack of funding is a running theme in his whole account [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 220–221, 222–223; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 28–29, 30–31]. He presents himself as forewarning his colleagues that Almish would demand his money, as proved to be the case [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 198–199; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 10]. The funding crisis was due to the unwillingness of Ibn al-Furat's steward to transfer the revenues from his estate in the Samanid realm over to Ibn Fadlan's party. Ibn Fadlan represents his mission as, in effect, doomed to fall short of its main aim – generously befitting and thus gratifying the Volga Bulgar ruler – from the time it set forth from Bukhara without the necessary funds. In light of this general observation, one can read Ibn Fadlan's text as essentially an explanation for the failure of a mission, a form of self-justification and indeed 'self-promotion' that amounts to self-advertisement. Bearing in mind my first general observation, the political instability in Baghdad (which could hardly have been

unknown to Ibn Fadlan), I suggest that he may have intended his story to serve as kind of 'job application', for reading out aloud to possible employers. His prospects of returning to a post in Baghdad were, after all, rather poor and (as one or two scholars have suggested) [Montgomery, 2004, p. 83], Ibn Fadlan may well have been looking for employment with some emir in the Caspian region, if not at a court in the Samanid dominions.

Bearing this in mind, I would make a third general observation that may be no less valid for being rather less obvious. I propose a connection between two seemingly unrelated sections in Ibn Fadlan's account of his stay on the Volga and certain apprehensions along with news of recent events that were in play at the time of his writing. If one takes this historical background into account, I suggest, the rationale for these two sections becomes clear. They demonstrate Ibn Fadlan's expert knowledge of two of the great issues of the day, thereby flagging up his own employability, whether in the Samanid dominions or in the regions that lay within striking distance of the Caspian. The sections in question are those devoted to the people of Gog and Magog and to the people of the Rus. Far from showing discursiveness or forming part of an elaborate literary hoax, these sections serve to demonstrate to contemporaries (as to us), Ibn Fadlan's exceptional talents as observer and analyst, and thus his potential value as counsellor and agent to whoever would give him a job. First, though, one must stress that the professions of Islamic faith and devotional practice expressed or implied by his account are not of a sort likely to have rendered him unemployable anywhere in the Caspian region or the Samanid dominions. He does find fault with some of the devotional practices of the Volga Bulgars, which they will have picked up from the nearest Muslim societies, most obviously (but not necessarily exclusively) from the Samanids. But he gives no hint of any major sectarian divide. Indeed, his description of the Samanid court at Bukhara, especially of the vizier al-Jayhani, is respectful. In any case one should, when considering reports of travellers such as Ibn Fadlan, bear in mind that divisions between the four main schools of jurisprudence were, in the later ninth and tenth centuries, neither invariably bitter nor unbridgeable. In fact they offered 'mutual recognition' to one another [Robinson, 2010, p. 693]. And recent scholarship has played down the acrimony of the differences between proponents of the Sunni consensus and many of the variants of Shi'ism then burgeoning: their predisposition was in favour of coexistence [Baker, 2019, p. 59–76; Marsham et al., 2021a, p. 243; 2021b, p. 335, 347–348; 2021c, p. 465–467].

Turning to the forementioned sections of Ibn Fadlan's account discussing Gog and Magog and the Rus, one may just highlight their main features, since they are so well-known. Ibn Fadlan describes in detail the giant about whom one of his travelling companions, Takin the Turk, had already informed him. The giant, now deceased, was one of the people of Gog and Magog, and he had stayed among the Volga Bulgars for some while. Ibn Fadlan is taken to see the giant's bones by Almish, the Volga Bulgar ruler, who answers his enquiries about the monstrous creature: its head alone is 'like a bees' nest'. Details of the whereabouts of Gog and Magog – across the sea from the Wisu, a people who themselves live three months' travel away from the Middle Volga – are given, along with their way of life and the 'barrier' and sea which hold them back. However, should Almighty God so wish, He could open up the barrier, the sea would dry up, and the people of Gog and Magog would burst forth across the civilised world [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 232–237; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 40–41]<sup>1</sup>. All this is recounted to Ibn Fadlan by none other than Almish himself, who had written to the people of Wisu for information about Gog and Magog.

Scarcely less remarkable is the eyewitness description Ibn Fadlan gives of the Rus. Pride of place in this section goes to the boat-burning of a leading Rus, which Ibn Fadlan recounts in considerable detail with the help of his interpreter and the participants in the rites with whom the interpreter spoke. The episode ends with a conversation about putrefaction and the afterlife, with a Rus advocate

<sup>1</sup> On the prophecies about Gog and Magog, see below.

of cremation. One of the Rus, standing beside the author at the boat-burning, decries the Muslim practice of inhuming the dead – for the worms to eat [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 252–253; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 54]. There follows a passage about the Rus ruler’s court and the 400 elite warriors who are maintained there [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 252–253; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 54–55]. Although briefer, this passage’s format is comparable to Ibn Fadlan’s description of the Khazar ‘king’. Indeed he proceeds immediately to discuss the reclusive ruler, who is called ‘the Great Khaqan’ [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 254–255; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 55]. This raises the question whether the Rus may feature in Ibn Fadlan’s account partly for purposes of comparison with the Khazars, in terms of political structures, relations with the Volga Bulgars, and military might: the Khazars manifestly dominate the Lower Volga and they even loom large over the Bulgars [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 238–241; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 44–45], while the author himself observes Rus traders sailing in from the Upper Volga and outlines their military organisation.

These suggestions beg the question why a display of firsthand knowledge about the giant from Gog and Magog would have seemed to Ibn Fadlan advantageous in gaining employment at a Samanid or other Muslim court. The answer lies partly in the fact that the people of Gog and Magog, the location of the Wall containing them, and any changes in their situation were matters of longstanding concern to Muslim leaders. The Wall had already been described by Ibn Khordadbeh on the strength of a detailed travel report, dictated to him by its author, Sallam. The latter had travelled on behalf of the Abbasid government to investigate the Wall, gather information about Gog and Magog and, importantly, look for any signs of a breakout [van Donzel, Schmidt, 2010, p. 182–184; Zadeh, 2011, p. 49–51, 62–63; Ducène, 2022]. The fullest version of Sallam’s report, relayed by Ibn Khordadbeh, tells of his journey to the north and the enquiries Sallam’s party made as to the Wall and the whereabouts of Gog and Magog. Ibn Khordadbeh’s text is edited and translated by Emeri van Donzel and Andrea Schmidt [van Donzel, Schmidt, 2010, p. 122–141]. In the mountains, they saw the Gate shutting them in, and asked the locals, “‘Have you seen anyone of Gog and Magog?’” They answered that ‘they once had seen a number of them on the mountain, but a black wind had blown and thrown them back...’ [van Donzel, Schmidt, 2010, p. 136–137]. This bears comparison with Ibn Fadlan’s coverage of Gog and Magog, reflecting the fact that concern about Gog and Magog was widespread in the tenth century. For example Ibn Rustah, writing early in the century, held that ‘the fifth climate begins, in the east, in the land of Gog’ [Wiet, 1955, p. 109]. A generation or so later Hasdai ben Shaprut, the Judaist vizier at the Umayyad court in Cordoba, wrote to the Khazar ruler asking (among other things) what he knew about the peoples of scriptural prophecy and the End Time [Kokovtsov, 1932, p. 70, 87; Stepanov, 2020, p. 26–29; Drocourt, 2007, p. 71–73]. So the information about Gog and Magog in Ibn Fadlan’s possession would have been valuable to Muslim authorities anywhere, but particularly to those in ‘frontline’ regions facing the northern peoples.

This brings us to a second topic that is covered at some length in Ibn Fadlan’s account of his stay on the Volga: the Rus. He begins his description in an allusive fashion with a bare assertion – ‘I also saw the Rus’ – as if he were fulfilling instructions to report on them, and anyway on the assumption that his information would be of keen interest [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 240–241; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 45]. Such expectations would be quite understandable, given all the destruction and terror a huge Rus raiding fleet of, reportedly, 500 ships had wrought on communities living around the Caspian’s southern shores a few years earlier – in, probably, 913 or 914. The precise date is uncertain, since our sole clue comes from Masudi’s statement that the raid occurred ‘[some time] after 300 AH [18 August 912– 6 August 913]’, and the raiding is said to have lasted ‘several months’ [Pellat, 1962, p. 166; Minorsky, 1958, p. 152; Lunde, Stone, 2012, p. 144]. Masudi’s chronology is not impeccable, but he tends to be more accurate for those regions of which he had personal experience, and the southern coast of the Caspian was one such. Moreover, what is known of the Muslim figures he names – notably the ruler of Shirvan, Ali ibn al-Haytham – fits with his chronology. Ali ibn al-Haytham is

depicted as marshalling resistance to the Rus with some competence, only to be utterly overwhelmed [Pellat, 1962, p. 166; Minorsky, 1958, p. 152; Lunde, Stone, 2012, p. 145; Ashurbeili, 1983, p. 76–77; Baumer, 2021, p. 270–271].

This was far from being the first of their raids in the Caspian, but it seems to have been exceptionally far-reaching and destructive. The repercussions of the Rus' ravaging will have been reverberating at least as loudly in Ibn Fadlan's time as they were in Masudi's, a generation later. According to Masudi, apparently drawing on his recollections of what he has heard from them, the story of the Rus attacks is well-known to people living around the Caspian and is widespread [Pellat, 1962, p. 167; Minorsky, 1958, p. 153]. They raided around the southern Caspian coast and, he remarks, mounted detachments of Rus also ranged far inland: 'the city of Ardabil in Azerbaijan is around three days' journey from the sea' [Pellat, 1962, p. 166; Minorsky, 1958, p. 151; Lunde, Stone, 2012, p. 145]. This would have made details about the Rus' lifestyle in the north of strategic value to any emir within striking-distance of the Caspian. Conversely, emirs in this region had no need or desire to hear more about the Rus raid or the damage inflicted if (as Masudi says, and one might anyway expect), the story was all too well-known to them. As with his treatment of Gog and Magog, Ibn Fadlan provides information not so readily available to the Muslim authorities. The Rus whom he reports on are not lacking in politico-military organisation, and are armed to the teeth: Ibn Fadlan itemizes the weaponry sported by every Rus male of substance: 'axes, swords, and daggers' [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 240–241; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 45]. But their preoccupation is with speedy and profitable selling of all the furs and slaves they bring to market, wishing then to go upon their way. They are formidable but oriented towards the north, even writing the name of their 'king' along with the deceased Rus' name on a post on the barrow raised over the boat-burning [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 252–253; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 54]. In other words, Ibn Fadlan's report is rich in background information, eyewitness observations of a sort that would not be known to Muslim rulers in the way that the raiding of 913/914 was. And the overall message he conveys is one of stability: the Rus are not perpetually on the warpath, and their main preoccupation is the less menacing one of maximising their profits from trading.

This explanation for the amount of attention paid to the Rus and to Gog and Magog seems to me reasonably firm. But I'll venture a couple of further general observations. Firstly, there may be method in Ibn Fadlan's repeated indications that the Khazars have the Lower and Middle Volga regions pretty firmly under their thumb. As an officeholder at the Abbasid court and then an inquisitive traveller, he can hardly have been unaware of the disaster befalling the recent Rus expedition. Returning laden with booty seized around the Caspian and expecting safe passage through Khazaria in return for a pre-arranged share of the booty, the Rus were – against the Khazar ruler's wishes – attacked by the Muslims living at Itil. Most were slain and those fleeing along the Volga were picked off by the people of the Burtas or, further upriver, by the Muslim Bulgars [Pellat, 1962, p. 167; Minorsky, 1958, p. 152–153; Lunde, Stone, 2012, p. 146]. Thus the Khazars held the key to security in the Muslim world, at least in regard to the Caspian region. So, for all the Abbasid government's willingness to send funds and instructors to the newly-converted ruler Almish in response to his appeal for aid against the Jewish Khazars, *Realpolitik* weighs in favour of peace (if not amity) with the Khazars, by way of forestalling any future Rus raids and devastation. It is, I suggest, no accident that Ibn Fadlan's treatment of the Khazar politico-military structure follows directly on from his description of the Rus king's court. He highlights certain resemblances between the courts while elaborating on the ceremonial that envelops the Khazars' ruler (Great Khaqan), the overall social and military discipline, and the very harsh penalties for fleeing in battle. He also draws attention to the significant Muslim population resident at Itil [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 256–257; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 57–58].

Ibn Fadlan is making a case, albeit indirectly, for peaceful coexistence with the Khazars, despite their rivalry and religious differences. The last section of his *Risala* recounts an episode

involving the Great Khaqan's destruction of a minaret, dated to 922/923 and thus probably around the time of writing. Its underlying message is the relative moderation of the ruler's response to the destruction of a synagogue in a Muslim land: he orders the razing of the tall minaret of the Muslim's congregational mosque, and the killing of the muezzins. Ibn Fadlan also remarks on the prominence of the Muslim community in the Khazar capital, which has its own – Muslim – head; he is answerable only to the Great Khaqan and is responsible for traders from the Muslim world, too [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 256–257; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 57–58]. Ibn Fadlan is, I suggest, effectively arguing for the value of the Khazars as a buffer against the Rus, without needing to mention the recent Rus raid on the Caspian. He highlights the Khazars' role as stabilizers. Indeed the last words of Ibn Fadlan's text (as it stands) offer a mild but firm rebuke to those who 'claim that the Khazars are the tribes of Gog and Magog' [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 258–259; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 58; Evans, 2022]. In light of what he has earlier said about the giant's bones and Gog and Magog's whereabouts, this statement conveys a sense of irony.

The statement also prompts a further general observation – or rather, a question. May there not be some connection between the sections Ibn Fadlan devoted to Gog and Magog and to the Rus? There is not, to my knowledge, any statement in an Arabic source of the tenth century identifying the Rus with Gog and Magog. But I think it would be surprising if some such identification were not made in the wake of the Rus' destructiveness and savagery on their Caspian expedition in 913/914. After all, the Byzantines were apt to identify them as the *Rozh*, a branch of Gog and Magog, as Leo the Deacon records of Sviatoslav's campaigns in the Balkans two generations or so later [Hase, 1828, p. 150; Talbot, Sullivan, 2005, p. 194; Shepard, 1974, p. 12–13]. Supposing that the raid of 913/914 was seen in the Muslim world as the first stirrings from the people of Gog and Magog, a firsthand report on affairs in the far north would have been of keenest interest and, indeed, strategic value. With his careful and detailed depictions of the Rus and the people of Gog and Magog, both based on eyewitness reporting, Ibn Fadlan was offering a kind of reassurance that the End Time was not imminent.

This in turn raises the question of what Ibn Fadlan was writing for: to whom was he offering information and reassurance? As I have already surmised, he may well have been looking for employment at the Samanid court. Ibn Fadlan's description of the Samanid emir, Nasr ibn Ahmad, is neutral, without either fawning or being particularly derogatory: he and his fellow-envoys found Nasr to be still a boy, 'without even a beard'; but he exchanges formal greetings with the embassy and expresses deference to the caliph's commands [IbnF<sup>1</sup>, p. 192–193; IbnF<sup>2</sup>, p. 5]. One is left in no doubt that al-Jayhani is the effective power behind the throne and if, as is likely, Ibn Fadlan composed his account quite soon afterwards, his treatment of the power balance there would have been politic. Indeed, employment under al-Jayhani's auspices might not have been out of the question, at least in Ibn Fadlan's eyes (as Professor Zimonyi suggested during the discussion following my presentation in Moscow). Equally, he could have been seeking employment with some emir in the Caspian region. Either way, the location and behaviour patterns of Gog and Magog would have been of obvious interest to them, together with the details of the Turkic steppe-nomads through whom he had travelled. And here, I suggest, James Montgomery's discovery that much of the text is in Middle Arabic should help to answer the question. A few Middle Arabic texts from the premodern era are known, and perhaps more will be identified in light of Montgomery's work. They tend to be words that were taken down from dictation, or are intended for delivery by word of mouth. Thus Middle Arabic is the language in which the memoirs of Usamah ibn Munquidh are written. Seemingly, the old warrior and poet dictated them in extreme old age and, significantly, only a single manuscript of this counsellor of Saladin survives [Hitti, 2000, p. 17–20; Schen, 1972, p. 222, 231–232; Blau, 1999, p. 221–224; Cobb, 2005, p. 8–9]. The copyist of the manuscript is thought to have left much of it in Middle Arabic, especially the numerous passages of direct speech [Schen, 1972, p. 232]. If Usamah intended his text to be polished up and widely circulated, this never came about.

We know nothing for sure about the circumstances and location in which Ibn Fadlan's text came into existence, but almost certainly those circumstances were, in some sense, extraordinary, and thus the customary rules governing use of classical Arabic need not apply, especially as so much of his account is in direct speech, like Usamah's. Ibn Fadlan could perhaps have been composing a private memoir, with the help of a logbook of dates and conversations kept up during his outwards journey. That such memoirs or diaries were kept for purposes of record-keeping and personal musings is attested by the chance survival of a portion of the autograph journal of the mid-eleventh-century Baghdad scholar Ibn al-Banna [Makdisi, 1956, p. 30; Montgomery, 2004, p. 79]. But since he is essentially justifying his own actions and making an apologia for the failure of a mission, his main concern is probably with circulating his account as widely as possible. A comparably self-exculpating apologia for failure was written in 969 by the Italian-born churchman and envoy, Liudprand of Cremona [Chiesa, 1998, p. 187–218; Shepard, 2022]. This would be the case if, as I suggest, Ibn Fadlan was making a kind of 'job application' to Muslim authorities in the Caspian region or the Samanid lands. Ibn Fadlan might well have prepared a text for delivering at courts and salons, perhaps even circulating copies for others to read aloud elsewhere. Or, conceivably, our text may amount to lecture-notes, taken down by a listener at one of his presentations [Montgomery, 2022]. In any case, that Ibn Fadlan's report on the Rus is, together with the rest of his text, composed in the Arabic of everyday speech can only heighten the sense of eyewitness accuracy and immediacy which his report inspires.

#### ABBREVIATIONS / СОКРАЩЕНИЯ

IbnF<sup>1</sup> – Montgomery J.E. (ed. and tr.). Ibn Faḍlān. Mission to the Volga. *Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India*. New York: New York University Press, 2014. Pp. 165–297.

IbnF<sup>2</sup> – Lunde P., Stone C. (tr.). The Book of Ahmad Ibn Faḍlān 921–922. *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North*. London: Penguin Books, 2012. Pp. 3–58.

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