



PENGUIN CLASSICS

IBN FADLĀN

Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness

Arab Travellers in the Far North

Pagan burial rites

The women do not weep for the dead, but the men weep over him on the day of death. They stand at the door of his tent and sob, making the most hideous and savage noise. This is how it is done by free men. When their lamentations are over, the slaves come with plaited leather thongs and weep continually as they strike their sides and any uncovered parts of their bodies with the straps, until their bodies are marked as if by the blows of a whip. They must set up a banner before the door of the tent. They bring the dead man's weapons and set them around his tomb. They continue these lamentations for two years.

When the two years are over, they lower the banner and cut their hair, and the close relatives of the dead man offer a feast to mark the end of mourning. If the dead man had a wife, she can then remarry. This is the custom among the great men of that land. The common people only perform a part of these ceremonies for their dead.

Taxes and custom duties

The king of the Saqāliba is required to pay a tax to the king of the Khazars. He gives a sable skin for each household in his kingdom. When a boat arrives in the land of the Saqāliba from Khazar territory, the king rides out and checks what is in each boat and levies a tithe on everything. When it is the Rūs or people of other races, who come with slaves, the king has the right to take for himself one head in ten.

Marriage of a Jewish prince and a Muslim princess

The son of the king of the Saqāliba is a hostage to the king of the Khazars. This last, having learned that the king of the Saqāliba had a beautiful daughter, asked for her in marriage.

But the king of the Saqāliba made excuses and refused. The king of the Khazars sent men and had her carried off by force. Now, he was a Jew and she was a Muslim. She died there with him and he demanded another daughter in marriage. As soon as this request reached the king of the Saqāliba, he hastened to marry his daughter to king Askal, who was subordinate to him, for fear that the king of the Khazars should carry her off by force as he had her sister.

A fortress for the Saqāliba

The king of the Saqāliba, fearing the king of the Khazars, wrote to the caliph and asked him to build him a fortress.

One day I questioned him, saying:

'Your kingdom is vast, you have great wealth, the taxes you raise are considerable, so why did you ask the caliph to build you a castle from his own, admittedly unlimited, funds?'

'I thought,' he answered, 'that the empire of Islam is prosperous and that its revenues come from licit sources. For this reason, I made my request. If I had wanted to build a fortress with my own money, silver or gold, it would not have been impossible for me. But I wanted to have the blessing which is attached to money coming from the Commander of the Faithful, and so I asked him for it.'

The beauty of the Rūs

I saw the Rūs, who had come for trade and had camped by the river Itil. I have never seen bodies more perfect than theirs. They were like palm trees. They are fair and ruddy. They wear neither coats [*qurtāq*] nor caftans, but a garment which covers one side of the body and leaves one hand free. Each of them carries an axe, a sword and a knife and is never parted from any of the arms we have mentioned. Their swords are broad

46 bladed and grooved like the Frankish ones. From the tips of his toes to his neck, each man is tattooed in dark green⁸⁰ with designs, and so forth.

Brooches, torques and beads

All their women wear on their bosoms a circular brooch⁸¹ made of iron, silver, copper or gold, depending on their husband's wealth and social position. Each brooch has a ring in which is a knife, also attached to the bosom. Round their necks, they wear torques of gold and silver, for every man, as soon as he accumulates 10,000 dirhams, has a torque made for his wife. When he has 20,000, he has two torques made and so on. Every time he increases his fortune by 10,000, he adds another torque to those his wife already possesses, so that one woman may have many torques round her neck.

The most desirable ornaments they have are green ceramic beads they keep in their boats.⁸² They will pay dearly for them, one dirham for a single bead. They thread them into necklaces for their wives.

The uncleanness of the Rūs

They are the filthiest of God's creatures. They do not clean themselves after urinating or defecating, nor do they wash after having sex. They do not wash their hands after meals. They are like wandering asses.

The Rūs have sex with their slave girls in public

When they arrive from their land, they anchor their boat on the Itil, which is a great river, and they build large wooden houses

on the banks. Ten or twenty people, more or less, live together in one of these houses. Each man has a raised platform⁸³ on which he sits. With them, there are beautiful slave girls, for sale to the merchants. Each of the men has sex with his slave, while his companions look on. Sometimes a whole group of them gather together in this way, in full view of one another. If a merchant enters at this moment to buy a young slave girl from one of the men and finds him having sex with her, the man does not get up off her until he has satisfied himself.

Disgusting habits

Every day without fail they wash their faces and their heads with the dirtiest and filthiest water there could be. A young serving girl comes every morning with breakfast and with it a great basin of water. She proffers it to her master, who washes his hands and face in it, as well as his hair. He washes and disentangles his hair, using a comb, there in the basin, then he blows his nose and spits and does every filthy thing imaginable in the water. When he has finished, the servant carries the bowl to the man next to him. She goes on passing the basin round from one to another until she has taken it to all the men in the house in turn. And each of them blows his nose and spits and washes his face and hair in this basin.

Offerings to the idols

As soon as their boats arrive at this port, each of them disembarks, taking with him bread and meat, onions, milk and *nabidh*, and he walks until he comes to a great wooden post stuck in the ground with a face like that of a man, and around it are little figures. Behind these images there are long wooden stakes driven into the ground. Each of them prostrates himself before the great idol, saying to it:

even come to visit him] during all the days of his illness, particularly if he is a poor man or a slave. If he recovers and gets well, he comes back to them; if he dies, they burn him. If he is a slave, they leave him where he is, and the dogs and birds of prey devour him.

The punishment of thieves

If they catch a thief or a brigand, they lead him to a great tree, tie a stout rope round his neck and hang him [from the tree, and there he remains] until he drops to pieces [from exposure] to the wind and the rain.

The burial of a great man

They say that when their great men die, they do all kinds of things to them, of which burning is the least. I wanted to have certain knowledge of this [but did not] until one day I learned of the death of one of their great men. They placed him in his grave which they covered with a roof and they left him there for ten days, waiting while they finished cutting and sewing his garments.

The burial of a poor man

If the dead man was poor, they build him a small boat and place him in it and set it on fire. If he was wealthy, they gather together his fortune and divide it into three parts, one for his family, one to have clothes cut out for him and another to have the *nabīdh* prepared that they will drink on the day that his slave girl kills herself and is burned with her master. For they drink *nabīdh* unrestrainedly, night and day, so that sometimes one of them dies with his wine cup in his hand.

'Oh my Lord, I have come from a far country and I have with me such and such a number of young slave girls, and such and such a number of sable skins . . . and so on, until he has listed all the trade goods he has brought. [Then he adds:] 'I have brought you this gift.' Then he leaves what he has with him in front of the wooden post [and says:]

'I would like you to do the favour of sending me a merchant who has large quantities of *dīnārs* and dirhams and who will buy everything that I want and not argue with me over my price.'

Then he departs.

If he has difficulty selling and his stay becomes long drawn out, he returns with another present a second and even a third time. If he cannot get what he wants, he brings a present for each of the little idols and asks them to intercede, saying:

'These are the wives of our Lord and his daughters and sons.' Thus he continues to make his request to each idol in turn, begging their intercession and abasing himself before them. Sometimes the sale is easy and after having sold his goods he says:

'My Lord has satisfied my needs and it is fitting that I should reward him for it.'

Then he takes a certain number of sheep or cows and slaughters them, distributing part of the meat as gifts and carrying off the rest to set before the great idol and the little figures that surround it. Then he hangs the heads of the sheep or cows on the wooden stakes which have been driven into the ground. When night falls, the dogs come and eat all this, and the man who has made the offering says:

'My Lord is pleased with me and has eaten the gift that I brought him.'

The sick abandoned

If one of them falls ill, [the others pitch a tent for him] in a place distant from them. They leave him some bread and water, but they neither go near him nor speak to him. [They do not

Funeral of a noble

When a great man dies, the members of his family say to his slave girls and young slave boys:

'Which of you will die with him?'

One of them replies:

'I will.'

Once they have spoken, it is irreversible and there is no turning back. If they wanted to change their mind, they would not be allowed to. Usually, it is the slave girls who offer to die.

When the man whom I mentioned above died, they said to his slave girls:

'Who will die with him?'

One of them answered:

'I will.'

Then they appointed two young slave girls to watch over her and follow her everywhere she went, sometimes even washing her feet with their own hands.

Everyone bustles himself about the dead man, cutting out clothes for him and preparing everything that he will need. Meanwhile, the slave girl spends each day drinking and singing, happily and joyfully.

When the day came that the man was to be burned and the girl with him, I went to the river where his boat was anchored. I saw that they had drawn his boat up on to the shore and that four posts of *khadank* or other wood had been driven into the ground and round these posts a framework of wood had been erected. Next, they drew up the boat until it rested on this wooden construction.

Then they came forward, coming and going, pronouncing [words that I did not understand, while the man was still in his grave, not yet taken out].

The 'Angel of Death'

Then they brought a bed and placed it on [the boat and covered it with a mattress] and cushions of Byzantine silk brocade.

Then came [an old woman whom they call] the 'Angel of Death' and she spread the bed with coverings we have just mentioned. She is in charge of sewing and arranging all these things, and it is she who kills the slave girls. I saw that she was a witch, thick-bodied and sinister.

When they came to the tomb of the dead man, they removed the earth from on top of the wood, and then the wood itself and they took out the dead man, wrapped in the garment in which he died. I saw that he had turned black because of the coldness of the country. They had put *nabīdh* in the tomb with him, and fruit and a drum. They took all this out. The dead man did not smell bad and nothing about him had changed except his colour. They dressed him in trousers, socks, boots, a tunic and a brocade caftan with gold buttons. On his head, they placed a brocade cap covered with sable. Then they bore him into the pavilion on the boat and sat him on the mattress, supported by cushions. Then they brought *nabīdh*, fruit and basil which they placed near him. Next they carried in bread, meat and onions which they laid before him.

Sacrificial animals

After that, they brought in a dog, which they cut in two and threw into the boat. Then they placed his weapons beside him. Next they took two horses and made them run until they were in lather, before hacking them to pieces with swords and throwing their flesh on to the boat. Then they brought two cows, which they also cut into pieces and threw them on to the boat. Finally they brought a cock and a hen, killed them and threw them on to the boat as well.

The slave girl has sex with those present

Meanwhile, the slave girl who wanted to be killed came and went, entering in turn each of the pavilions that had been

gave her another cup. She took it and continued singing for a long time, while the old woman encouraged her to drink and then urged her to enter the pavilion and join her master.

I saw that the girl did not know what she was doing. She wanted to enter the pavilion, but she put [her head] between it and the boat. Then the old woman seized her head, made her enter the pavilion and went in with her. The men began to bang on their shields with staves, to drown her cries, so that the other slave girls [would not be frightened] and try to avoid dying with their masters. Next, six men entered the pavilion and [lay with] the girl, one after another, after which they laid her beside her master. Two seized her feet and two others her hands. The old woman called the Angel of Death came and put a cord round her neck in such a way that the two ends went in opposite directions. She gave the ends to two of the men, so they could pull on them. Then she herself approached the girl holding in her hand a dagger with a broad blade and [plunged it again and again between the girl's ribs],⁸⁴ while the two men strangled her with the cord until she was dead.

The burning of the boat

Next, [the closest male relative of the dead man] came forward and [took a piece of wood] which he lit at a fire. He then walked backwards towards the boat, his face turned [towards the people] who were there, one hand holding the piece of flaming wood, the other covering his anus, for he was naked. Thus he set fire to the wood that had been set ready under the boat, [after they had placed the slave girl beside her master.] Then people came with wood and logs to burn, each holding a piece of a wood alight at one end, which they threw on to the wood. The fire enveloped the wood, [then the boat, then the tent,] the man, the girl and all that there was on the boat. [A violent and frightening] wind began [to blow, the flames grew in strength] and the heat of the fire intensified.

built, and the master of each pavilion had intercourse with her, saying:
'Tell your master that I only did this for your love of him.'

The slave girl gazes on Paradise

On Friday, when the time had come for the evening prayer, they led the slave girl towards something which they had constructed and which looked like the frame of a door. She placed her feet on the palms of the hands of the men, until she could look over this frame. She said some words and they let her down. They raised her a second time and she did as she had the first and then they set her down again. And a third time and she did as she done the other two. Then they brought her a chicken. She cut off its head and tossed it away. Then they took the chicken and threw it on to the boat.

I asked the interpreter what she had been doing. He replied:

'The first time they lifted her up, she said:

[' "There I see my father and my mother."]

[' "There I see my father and my mother."]

[' "There I see] all my dead relatives [sitting]."

'And the third time she said:

' "There [I see my master sitting in] Paradise and [Paradise is green and beautiful.] There are men with him and [young people, and he is calling me.] Take [me to him.]" ' They went off with her] towards the boat. She took off the two bracelets that she was wearing and gave them both to the old woman who is known as the [Angel of Death - she] who was to kill her. Then she stripped off her two anklets and gave them [to the two young girls who served her. They were the daughters] of the woman called the Angel of Death. Then the men lifted her on to the boat, but did not let her enter [the pavilion].

Next, men came with shields and staves. They handed the girl a cup of *nabīdh*. She sang a song over it and drank. The interpreter translated what she was saying and explained that she was bidding all her female companions farewell. Then they

thing that he eats or drinks, and then there is another slave girl with whom he sleeps. These 400 men sit below the king's throne, which is immense and encrusted with the finest gems. Forty slave girls destined for his bed sit by him on the throne. Sometimes he has sex with one of them in front of the companions whom we have just mentioned, without coming down from his throne. When he wants to perform his natural functions, he does so in a basin. If he wants to ride, his horse is led right up to the throne and he mounts. If he wants to dismount, he has the horse move forward so that he can get down directly on to the throne. He has a lieutenant who commands his troops, fights his enemies and represents him in dealings with his subjects.

The king of the Khazars

The king of the Khazars, whose title is *khāqān*, only appears in public [once every four months]. He is called the Great Khāqān, whereas his lieutenant is known as *khāqān beg*.⁸⁵ It is he who leads the armies, directs the affairs of the kingdom, appears in public and receives the allegiance of neighbouring kings. [Every⁸⁶ day, he enters the presence of the Great Khāqān with a humble mien and words indicating submission and modesty. He only enters the presence barefoot, holding a piece of firewood in his hand. Once he has greeted the Great Khāqān, he ignites this piece of wood before him. When it has burned away, he sits beside the king on his throne, to the right of him.⁸⁷ He has as his second in command a man called *kundur khāqān*, who has in his turn a lieutenant known as *jawshūghīr*.⁸⁸

It is the custom of the Great King never to give public audience and never to speak to the people. No one, except for those whom we have mentioned, has access to him. It is up to his lieutenant, the *khāqān beg*, to nominate officers for all positions of authority, to inflict punishments and to take charge of the government.

Why the Rūs burn their dead

[One of the Rūs was standing beside me] and I heard him speak to my interpreter. I asked the latter [what he had said.] He replied:

'You Arabs are fools!'

['Why is that?' I asked him.]

He said:

'Because you put the men you love most, [and the most noble among you,] into the earth, and the earth and the worms and insects eat them. But we burn them [in the fire] in an instant, so that at once and without delay they enter Paradise.'

Then he began to laugh in a very excessive way. I asked him why he was laughing and he said:

'His Lord, for love of him, has sent a wind that [will bear] him hence within the hour.'

And indeed, not an hour had passed before ship, wood, girl and master were no more than ashes and dust.

Raising the grave mound

Next, at the place where this boat had been drawn out of the river, they build something like a round hill and in the middle they set up a great post of *khadank* wood, inscribed with the name of the man and that of the king of the Rūs. Then they departed.

The king of the Rūs

One of the customs of the king of the Rūs is to have 400 men in his palace, who are the bravest of his companions, men upon whom he can count. These are the men who die when he dies and allow themselves to be killed for him. Each of them has a slave girl who serves him, washes his head and prepares every-

The hidden tombs of the Khazar kings

When the Great King dies, it is customary to build him a house composed of twenty chambers and in each chamber to hollow out a tomb for him. They break up stones until they become like powdered antimony. They spread a layer of this powder and then throw quicklime on top of the body. Beneath this house there is a river, a great river that flows rapidly, which they divert over the tomb.

They say: 'This is so that no devil, or man, or maggot, or reptile can reach it.'

Once the king has been buried, they cut off the heads of those who buried him, so that no one knows in which of the chambers he lies. They call his tomb 'Paradise' and they say:

'He has entered Paradise.'

All the chambers are decorated with silk brocade woven with gold.

The harem of the king of the Khazars

It is the custom for the king of the Khazars⁸⁹ to have twenty-five wives, each of whom is the daughter of the king of a neighbouring country. He is given them freely or he takes them by force. He also has slave girls as his concubines for his bed, sixty in number, every one of them extremely beautiful. All these women, whether free or slave, are kept in an isolated castle, where each of them has her own alcove roofed with teak, and each alcove is surrounded by a pavilion. Each of them has with her a eunuch who protects her from all eyes. When the king wishes to sleep with one of them, he sends a messenger to the eunuch who guards her and he arrives with her quicker than the blink of an eye to put her in his bed, and then he remains standing at the door of the king's alcove. When the king has finished with her, the eunuch takes her by the hand and leads her back, without leaving her for a single moment.

When this Great King goes riding, all the troops set out with him as an escort, keeping the distance of a mile between him and them. None of his subjects sees him without prostrating themselves face to the ground, and they only lift their heads again after he has passed by.

The length of the reigns of their kings is forty years. If one of them oversteps this time even by a single day, his subjects and courtiers kill him, saying:

'His reason has diminished and his opinions are confused.'

The fate of cowards

If he sends out a detachment of his forces on an expedition, never under any circumstances or for any reason will they turn their backs on him. If they are routed, those who flee in the king's direction are killed. If his lieutenant or any of his military chiefs are put to flight, the king has them brought into his presence with their wives and children, and their wives and children are given away to others before their very eyes. The same is done with their horses, their possessions, their arms and their houses. Sometimes they are cut in two and sometimes crucified. Sometimes, the king has them hung from a tree by their necks. Sometimes, if he wishes to be kind to them, he employs them as grooms.

The Khazar city on the Itil

The king of the Khazars has a great city on the River Itil, on both banks of the river. The Muslims live on one bank and the king and his followers on the other. The head of the Muslim community is one of the king's officers and is known as *khaz*,⁹⁰ and he is a Muslim. All legal decisions concerning Muslims living in the land of the Khazars, or visiting the country on business are referred to this Muslim officer. He is the only

person with the authority to examine their affairs or judge their quarrels.

Revenge for the destruction of a synagogue

The Muslims in this town have a congregational mosque where they perform the Friday prayers. It has a tall minaret and a certain number of muezzins. When the king of the Khazars learned in the year 310/922 that the Muslims had destroyed the synagogue that was in Dār al-Bābūnaj,⁹¹ he ordered the minaret to be destroyed and the muezzins put to death.

'If I did not fear that not a synagogue would be left standing throughout the lands of Islam,' he said, 'I would have destroyed the mosque.'

The Khazars and their king are all Jews. The Saqāliba and all the neighbouring peoples are subject to him and he speaks to them as if they were slaves and they obey him most humbly. Some go so far as to say that Khazars are Gog and Magog.]

PART II

THE TRAVELS OF ABŪ HĀMID AL-ANDALUSĪ AL-GHARNĀTĪ, 1130-1155