

Did the Vikings trade with China?

On a controversial passage in Ibn Khordāhbeh's Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms

By Jan Romgard

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This paper discusses a 9th century Arabic source, Ibn Khordāhbeh's *Kitāb al-Masālik wal-Mamālik*, The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms, in which it is claimed that the Rus travelled to China. I look into previous interpretations of the text and present new studies of the two oldest extant copies of the original source. Several translators from the late 19th century on have claimed that this passage is misplaced. I argue that they have adapted their interpretations to fit their preconceptions rather than follow what is actually written in the original source. The text does state that the Rus traded with China. Whether Ibn Khordāhbeh's belief in the extent of Rus' eastern trade journeys was correct or not is another matter. But I point out that Ibn Khordāhbeh in his time may have had logical reasons for his statement. I also explain that "China" probably refers to Eastern Central Asian regions populated by Turkic-speaking peoples, who in their turn had direct trading contacts with Tang and later Liao Dynasty China.

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Eastern Scandinavian trade during the Viking Period in the 9th to 11th centuries coincided with a time when economic exchange on the Silk Road appears to have declined. Yet, this particular era in Central Asian history saw the creation of far-reaching trading networks between the Samanids, Byzantium, the central Caliphate, the Khazars, the Volga Bulgars and the Rus from the north. Written sources like *The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms* and finds of Samanid coin hoards in Sweden and of Baltic amber in China indicate that these networks also had contact with economies further to the east of the Pamir Mountains. This gainsays a general belief that trade on the Silk Roads at this time had almost ceased.

One reason for this common view is that trade

was interrupted, or at least minimised, following the withdrawal of Chinese influence from Central Asia from the mid-8th century on. After being defeated by the Arabs at the battle of Talas in 751, the An Lushan rebellion, and the expansion of the Tibetans towards Gansu, Imperial China had to direct most of its attention towards internal rather than external affairs. On the other hand, as often occurred during times of instability on the land routes from Central Asia, trade on the open sea route to China around India intensified (Chaudhuri 1985; 2005, p. 172). Nevertheless, trade across the land routes with China did continue, although now mostly under the control of the rising power of the Uighurs, who became rich and powerful to the extent that they were able to

build an empire stretching far eastward from the Tianshan Mountains to Manchuria, establishing their centre in what is now Mongolia.

In this paper I will discuss a 9th century source relating to this eastward trade: two passages in Ibn Khordādhbeh's *Kitāb al-Masālik wa l-Mamālik*, that is, *The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms*. It is mentioned in the book that Jewish traders, called Radhanites, traded with the Uighurs and China, and that the Rus (i.e. Scandinavians in Russia) went to the Caspian Sea and Baghdad. Few historians and archaeologists today, however, know that the most commonly quoted translation of this text is controversial. An alternative interpretation would imply that the Rus played a more important role in the eastern trade on the Silk Road than has generally been believed.

As this less known controversy concerns an era in history from which written sources are scarce, it seems worthwhile to take a closer look at Ibn Khordādhbeh's account, compare the various interpretations of it, and discuss the implications that they would have for our understanding of 9th century eastern trade. I aim to clarify what is actually said in the passages in question, to look into the various interpretations made, and to suggest possible explanations as to why Ibn Khordādhbeh might have written what he did and whether he really could have been referring to the Rus or not.

Transliterations and transcriptions of Arabic texts have varied greatly from source to source in the last 150 years. I have as far as possible followed the most established versions, and when quoting, used the same as given in the original source.

A controversial passage

The controversial section in *The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms* consists of three pages (for the most quoted print and translation, see *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum VI* 1889; reprint 1967, Arabic pp. 153–155, French pp. 114–116) where Ibn Khordādhbeh describes the routes taken by two different groups of traders: a Jewish group called the Radhanites and a group called the Rus, today mostly referred to as Vikings or Varangians. (For a balanced and modern view on the issue of Scandinavian influence in Early Medieval Russia, see

Jansson 1997.) The accounts of the two groups are of equal length, about one page each. First, under a headline about the Radhanites (“Itinéraire des marchands juifs, dits ar-Râdhânyya” according to de Goeje’s translation), the author describes the languages they speak, the various goods they trade in, and their travels from France to Constantinople and Baghdad, Sind, India and China. Then follows a passage about the Rus, under the headline “Itinéraire des marchands russes”. Here Ibn Khordādhbeh explains the goods and trade routes taken by the Rus, for instance how they go ashore wherever they like on the Caspian Sea, and sometimes bring their goods from the Caspian to Baghdad by camel. These two passages are followed by the controversial section, a description of land routes:

These different journeys can also be made by land. The merchants that start from Spain or France go to Sous al-Akza (Morocco), and then to Tangiers, whence they march to Kairuwan and the capital of Egypt. Thence they go to al-Ramla, visit Damascus, al-Kufa, Bagdad, and Basrah, cross Ahwaz, Fars, Kirman, Sind, Hind, and arrive at China. Sometimes they likewise take the route behind Rome, and, passing through the country of the Slavs, arrive at Khamlij, the capital of the Khazars. They embark on the Jorjan Sea, arrive at Balkh, betake themselves from there across the Oxus, and continue their journey toward the Yourts of the Toghozghor, and from there to China.

(transl. J. Jacobs 1919, p. 196)

The question is, however: to whom is Ibn Khordādhbeh referring in the quoted passage? The Rus or the Radhanites? If we did not have any previous knowledge or assumptions about the extent of Rus travels, would we not imagine that the text was about the Rus? After all, it is placed under the headline about the itineraries of the Rus, and Ibn Khordādhbeh has already in the previous section described the Radhanite traders and their routes to China, which in fact seem to include both travels by land and by sea.¹

Or does this passage actually refer to the Radhanites? Is its placement under the headline about

Rus itineraries a mistake? Should it have been somewhere else, or should it not have been there at all?

Radhanite interpretations

The first two translations of the section (Sprenger into English 1844, pp. 521–524; Meynard into French 1865, pp. 512–515) presented the Rus' and Radhanites' trade routes in the order given in the original source and did not question the land travels further.²

The arguably most influential translation of Ibn Khordādhbeh's text, however, was presented at the Oriental Congress in Vienna in 1889: the classical work by Michael Jan de Goeje, published in the same year as volume VI of the *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* (BGA). This is still not only the most used translation of Ibn Khordādhbeh's account, but also probably the translation most scholars have consulted for new interpretations of the Arabic text. The reasons are that de Goeje compared extant copies of the treatise prior to writing his own interpretation, and that his work was published in full together with the original text in the BGA series, which has become a major reference work on Arabic geography.

De Goeje obviously himself believed that the passage in question, "travels by land", concerned the Radhanite traders, because, as clarification, he adds a footnote: "That is, those of the Jews". It is not mentioned there why he held this belief, but in his preface he says that some passages in *The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms* are placed differently in the various copies of the work (de Goeje 1889, reprint 1967, p. XVII). He also states that some passages seem to belong in other places, although their wording does not differ from that of other copies.

The problem, of course, is that Ibn Khordādhbeh's original manuscript has been lost. Only three manuscript copies are available to us: a copy dated 1232 and kept in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, an undated copy judged to have been compiled before the 12th century in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, and a 19th century copy in Paris (Birkeland 1954, p. 10; Golden 1980, vol. 1, p. 115). By comparing various events mentioned in the copies, de Goeje deduced that Ibn Khordādhbeh produced two editions of his

work: an early version finished around AD 848–849 (AH 232) – used by the copyist for the Oxford manuscript – and a later more complete edition, which was not finished until 885/886 (AH 272) – represented by the Vienna document. De Goeje claimed that the later copy, which he mainly used for his translation, is very close in terms of time, and therefore content, to the original second edition written by Ibn Khordādhbeh.³ However, he contradicted himself, because in that very version the passage we are interested in was placed under the "Rus" headline (BGA VI, p. 154/116; MS Vienna Nationalbibliothek 783). Moreover, that is actually the case in both editions (MS Huntington 433). Indeed, de Goeje himself states that the value of Ibn Khordādhbeh's testimony on the Rus and the Radhanites is increased by its existence in both versions (de Goeje 1889, reprint 1967, p. XX).

De Goeje, after reviewing the text, clearly decided on an interpretation that seemed likely to him. His footnote referring the passage to the Radhanites is probably the reason why so few scholars have realised that this interpretation is actually not certain. Most scholars have simply taken for granted that the passage is about the Radhanites without giving it a second thought.

Some, however, *have* taken a closer look, and yet believed de Goeje was right. Josef Marquart (1903, p. 352), for example, said that these "great" land routes from Spain and France "of course" refer to the Jewish traders.⁴ Others, like Joseph Jacobs (1919, p. 196) in his translation, have taken the seemingly logical step and simply cut out the passage from the Rus itineraries and pasted it in under the Radhanite ones. His choice is understandable as his book focused upon the Radhanites, and he translated the passage into English after having read the note in de Goeje's translation.

Tadeusz Lewicki (1956, p. 118 f) agreed too, stating that the section in question "undoubtedly" belongs to the Radhanites' itineraries. He, furthermore, suggested that the mistake was due not to Ibn Khordādhbeh, but to the copyist who may have distorted the original layout.

Omeljan Pritsak (1970, pp. 241–244), the expert on Medieval Ukrainian history at Harvard, pointed out that the Radhanites' and Rus' itineraries are also mentioned in Ibn al-Faqīh's *Kitāb*

al-Buldān or *Book of Lands*, dated 902/903. Here the land routes are “omitted”, as was also pointed out briefly by Lewicki. However, Pritsak did not question these land journeys. Instead he assigned them to the Radhanites and suggested that they and the Rus had become mixed up. He believed that the two groups had not even been contemporary, and that the latter replaced the former in the mid-9th century. The mix-up could have happened, argued Pritsak, when an official received a report on the newcomers and incorporated it into the margin of an older report on the Radhanites, or on a separate sheet, thus confusing both Ibn Khordādhbeh and Ibn al-Faqīh. Pritsak believed that the two authors had used the same original documents, although Ibn al-Faqīh did so through a middleman, and therefore they should be seen as contemporaries.⁵ Yet, the *Book of Lands* was composed some 20 or 60 years after Ibn Khordādhbeh’s treatise (depending on its two possible editions) and it is well known that Ibn al-Faqīh borrowed data from other authors (Khalidov 1997, pp. 23–25). Furthermore, we know that Ibn al-Faqīh had access to Ibn Khordādhbeh’s work because he names it as a source for other parts of his book (see, for instance, *BGA V*, pp. 203 f).⁶

Peter B. Golden, following the view that he claimed “has long been held by Russian Arabists”, explained similarly in 1972 that the material about the Rus “is found sandwiched” inside that on the Radhanites. In a translation of the first words of the headline he put this interpretation within brackets: “and as regards their [the Rādhānīyah] land route” (Golden 1972, p. 64 n).⁷ In his *Khazar studies* (1980, vol. 1, p. 109) Golden went even further and – like Jacobs – simply moved the passage on the Rus itineraries to the Radhanite ones without mentioning this step away from the original source.

Rus interpretations

However, the influential Russian Jewish expert on Iranian history, Vladimir Minorsky, believed already in 1937 that the passage in question was about the Rus. Harris Birkeland (1954, p. 11; see also Lewicki’s criticism, 1956, p. 118 f) points this out and refers to a passage where Minorsky is trying to detect the formation of a Rus state in Arabic sources:

The principal Muslim sources refer to the momentous period of the establishment of the Northmen among the Slavs and it is essential to disentangle the data referring to its successive stages. Our oldest source I.Kh., [...] mixes up the Rūs with the Slavs and traces their commercial activities between Spain and China. There is no trace in I.Kh. of a Rūs state.

(Minorsky 1937, p. 433.)

In other words, Ibn Khordādhbeh might have confused the Rus with the Slavs in one way or another, but Minorsky did not at all assume that these “commercial activities between Spain and China” concerned the Radhanites. He took for granted that Ibn Khordādhbeh was referring to the Rus.⁸

Mahammed Hadj-Sadok (1949, pp. 22–25) also apparently supported the Rus interpretation. At least he chose to merely translate the text as it is actually composed without mentioning any doubts as to whom the passage is about.⁹

A new interpretation was presented in Moscow in 1967 when Boris N. Zakhoder argued that the controversial passage referred to both trading groups. He believed that the section is a résumé of the two preceding parts, and that the second trade route to China should therefore be attributed to both the Radhanite and the Rus (Zakhoder 1962–1967, tome II, p. 86).¹⁰

In the most recent translation, James Montgomery has taken one step further and explicitly assigned the whole paragraph on trade with China to the Rus. He states that the “itinerary has been incorrectly assimilated by some scholars with the fabled and oft-disputed Jewish trading federation, the Radhanites”, and specifically notes that “the Rus are said to travel as far as to al-Sin”, which he defines as “Turko-China” (Montgomery 2008, p. 551).¹¹ Furthermore, when publishing his translation in 2010 he concluded that he “can see no evidence to suggest any scribal confusion of Rus with Radhanite, or any reason to suggest with Pellat that this is an interpolation or revision by Ibn Khurradadhbih” (Montgomery 2010, p. 156).¹²

A closer look at the Radhanite interpretation

The question remains of which interpretation is correct – that of the Radhanite advocates or that

of Minorsky, Hadj-Sadok, Zakhoder and Montgomery? Let us first examine the possible reasons for the Radhanite interpretations.

If we follow de Goeje's note and – as did Jacobs and Golden – simply move the disputed passage from the Rus to the Radhanite account, it is indeed possible to see a pattern. The description of travels to China thus achieved seems logical. The first part appears to be about the sea routes around India to China. The latter seems to be about the land routes, from northern Africa via Baghdad, Basra, Sind and India to China, as well as the classic Silk Road through Central Asia to China. This interpretation looks both plausible and understandable, but there are a few things that speak against it.

Firstly, if the manuscript used by de Goeje is indeed so temporally close to the original written by Ibn Khordādhbeh, it is odd that these “land routes” were not placed under the headline about the Radhanites' itineraries but under the Rus'. Secondly, the routes described under the Rus headline, before the disputed section about land routes, also concern travels by water:

[They] transport beaver hides, the pelts of the black fox and swords from the farthest reaches of the Sakāliba to the Sea of Rūm [i.e., the Black Sea]. The ruler of Rūm [i.e., the Byzantine Empire] takes a tithe of them. If they wish, they go to the Tnys river [i.e. Tanais, the Greek name for the River Don], Yitil [i.e. Itil, the ancient name of the Volga], or Tin [variously identified as Don or Sever-sky Donets], the River of the Sakāliba. They travel to Khamlīdj/Khamlīkh, the city of the Khazars whose ruler takes a tithe of them. Then they betake themselves to the Sea of Djurdjān [Caspian Sea] and they alight on whichever of its shores they wish. Sometimes, they carry their goods from Djurdjān by camel to Baghdād. Saklab slaves translate for them. They claim that they are Christians and pay the *djizya*.¹³

Ibn Khordādhbeh is clearly describing waterways when he states that the Rus go to the Black Sea, use rivers like the Don or Volga to get to the capital of the Khazars, travel by boat on the Caspian

Sea and disembark on any of its shores at will. Only in the few final words does he describe how the Rus sometimes bring their goods from the Caspian to Baghdad by camel. All the rest is about water travel.

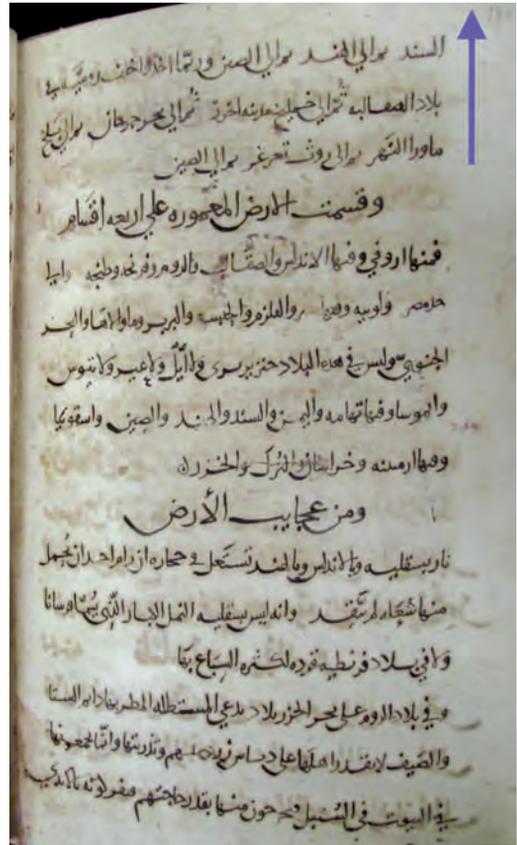
That brings us to the conclusion that Ibn Khordādhbeh may actually refer to the Rus in the disputed passage. If he believed that they indeed undertook these far-reaching itineraries by land, it would have been quite natural for him, after the short passage about their journeys to Baghdad, to continue with a further description about their land travels.

In fact, the first words in the passage about these land routes seem to vary depending on the translators' own points of view. According to de Goeje it starts: “Ces divers voyages peuvent se faire également par terre”, “These different journeys can also be made by land”. According to Birkeland, (who, however, does not translate the passage fully) it simply starts: “deres ferdseisveier til lands”, that is, “their land routes” (Birkeland 1954, p. 11).

To find out what is actually stated in the Arabic text, I have – with the kind help of the Bodleian Library and the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek – consulted the two oldest manuscripts: the undated Vienna copy and the Bodleian Library copy dated 1232. In both of these manuscripts, the passage begins with the words *Fa-'ammā maslakuhum fil-barr*, which more closely translated means “Concerning their travels by land.”¹⁴ Of course it is always up to the translator to interpret the text and adapt it to the new language to make it logical and fluent to read. But in this particular case, the slight difference between the original text and the new one in previous translations may have deviated from the author's intentions. Similarly, the translators putting their own interpretations in brackets or footnotes has led the readers in directions that are not in line with the original text.

Furthermore, considering the previous ideas about a mix-up involving the Rus section, it is important to point out that the Vienna copy bears signs that lower the credibility of the preceding Radhanite passage rather than that of the Rus. An inspection of the manuscript reveals that the Radhanite passage is visibly different from the

Fig. 1a-b. The two accounts about the Radhanites and the Rus in the Vienna copy (reading from right to left). The passage about the Radhanites (right) is marked red and the one about the Rus (left) is marked blue. The two trading tribes are described one after another, in a similar way involving both water- and land travels. Note the amendment on the page to the far right. The section about the Radhanites has been pasted in and is written in a different hand and darker ink. Reproduced with permission from Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.



surrounding pages. The paper is thicker, written in a different hand and with darker ink. Furthermore, a clear edge is seen where the section has been glued onto the original page. Thus, the Radhanite section has, on some occasion in the manuscript's long history, been mended and added, but not the Rus one, which is written in a similar hand and on the same paper as other original parts of the manuscript. De Goeje himself noted this amendment when reading the document. However, he mentions this only in a Latin footnote next to the Arabic text, not in his French translation where he instead claims that the Rus' section has been mixed up.

The question is thus: what was originally written on this page before the Radhanite account was pasted in? During my studies of the manuscript, I was not able to detect any of the original writing underneath the glued-on section. Yet, it

should be possible to reveal any remaining text using technology that does not harm the document (discussions are currently under way with the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek to do so – if the condition of the manuscript permits). However, as the Oxford manuscript – although of a later date – contains a similar section on the Radhanite journeys, which is placed in the same part of the book, the glued-on part is most likely simply a re-writing and mending of the original text.

Possible explanations for Ibn Khordādhbeh's choice of words

Probably the only way to get some proper answers on the Rus' travels would be to ask Ibn Khordādhbeh himself. This we cannot do, but we can try to imagine the situation surrounding the author in the 9th century, from Ibn Khordādhbeh's own point of view.



The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms is an official book concerning routes and stations and is to a great extent the result of archival research (Birkeland 1954, p. 10). Ibn Khordādhbeh himself, being Director-general of Posts and Intelligence in Baghdad and Samarra, could pick up reports and information collected from all over the Caliphate and from travellers returning from its periphery (Hadji-Sadok 1949, p. VIII; 1965/1971, p. 839; Bosworth 1997, p. 37 f). Among the many reports that attracted Ibn Khordādhbeh's attention while he was writing the book (between the mid-840s and the 880s – the exact time of its composition and first publication is, as mentioned, under dispute) must have been some on the activities of the Rus. He must have heard about their trading and raiding along the coasts of the Caspian Sea, their travels to Baghdad, their appearance on the Spanish coasts and expeditions into

the Mediterranean. As mentioned by al-Ya'qūbī and several Arabic sources, Northmen raided Seville in 843/44 (Ya'qūbī [al-Ya'qūbī]; traduit par Gaston Wiet 1937, p. 218 f).¹⁵ In 859–861, they went further into the Mediterranean Sea along the coast of northern Africa, and then crossed the sea to attack coastal cities in France and Italy. According to Ibn al-Qūṭīya (Birkeland 1954, p. 46) and further described by Alexander Vasiliev (1946, p. 62 f), the Scandinavians even ventured further to the southeast, attacking Alexandria.¹⁶

Imagine what this flow of reports must have looked like to Ibn Khordādhbeh. Here were the same kind of traders, known to us as West-Vikings and East-Vikings or Varangians, perceived by him as one and the same group that had been seen trading and raiding both in the west and in the east. He most likely concluded that they were the

same people. And that, from time to time in their travels and raiding, they might have crossed directly from here to there, from west to east, and vice versa.

He already knew about the Radhanite Jewish merchants, who frequented the same areas. He knew that they reached China on their trading expeditions, and in so doing passed some of the places where the Rus had been seen. With this in mind, when reading *The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms*, we may deduce something new from the text. The data about the two trading tribes are given on three pages in de Goeje's transcript (fig. 1; from right to left in the Arabic text). The Radhanites are covered in 17 lines and the Rus in 16 (in the Oxford copy, the first tribe is covered in 17 lines, the second in 15, while the lengths in the Vienna copy are 16 and 14 lines respectively; fig. 2). The two trading tribes are mentioned one after another in the text, described in a similar way, and at equal length. This suggests that the author considered them as being equally important.

In other words, in the view of Ibn Khordādhbeh, the Radhanites and the Rus must have looked like competitors in the same trade between east and west. His specific conclusions about the scope of the Rus's travels may have been exaggerated, but it is quite possible that the disputed passage does, after all, refer to the Rus.

The second trade route to China, described by Ibn Khordādhbeh as going "behind Rome" [Byzantium], passing through the country of the Slavs to the capital of the Khazars, via the Caspian Sea, Balkh, Transoxiana, and the "Yourts of the Toghozghor" to China, actually makes a lot of sense. Byzantium, the capital of the Khazars, and the Caspian Sea are places that the Rus are known from other sources to have visited frequently and on a large scale. According to Ibn Khordādhbeh himself, Rus traders disembarked on any of the shores of the Caspian Sea at will; an observation that might indicate that they more or less controlled the sea routes at this time. This makes the alternative interpretation of de Goeje and Marquart, saying that these routes concerned the Radhanites, less convincing. Strong archaeological evidence, moreover, supports the possibility of Rus trade further east of the Caspian. 60% of Islamic coins dating from the 9th to 11th

centuries found in Sweden have Samanid origin (Hovén 1981, pp. 119–128), that is, they are from the area east of the Caspian Sea, not from the central Caliphate (nor from Christian Byzantium, which is the source of only a small number of coins found in Northern Europe compared to the huge quantities of Islamic dirhams).¹⁷ Of course, these coins might just as well have been acquired by trade with the Khazars or Volga Bulgars, but their origin and number could indicate important Rus trade east of the Caspian Sea. Clearly the Samanid silver coins, coming one way or another from the east, were essential to the Rus economy.

Furthermore, archaeological finds in Sweden show that the Vikings early on borrowed elements from Central Asian nomads in their clothing, such as the caftan and the warrior belt. Ornamented belts of so called "Oriental" type began to appear in Viking clothing already in the 9th century, and became increasingly popular over the 10th and 11th centuries (Arne 1914, pp. 226, 228; Jansson 1977, p. 407 f; 1986, pp. 77–108; Hedenstierna 2006, p. 82).¹⁸ This influence is presently believed to have originated mainly from contacts with the Khazar and Volga Bulgar areas (Jansson 1977, p. 408; Eniosova & Murashova 1999; Hedenstierna-Jonsson & Holmquist Olausson 2006, p. 34). However, as stated already by T.J. Arne, there are also important links between the Swedish material and artefacts found in the areas east of the Caspian Sea. Arne traced certain 10th century bronze mounts to West Turkestan (especially to Samarkand and Bukhara) and his main conclusions about the origin of the Swedish finds still stand (Jansson 1977, pp. 389, 408, note 41; 1986, p. 96). Islamic metalwork of the 9th century (described as displaying a mix of both Central Asian and other influences) excavated at the site of Nishāpūr in northeastern Iran, moreover, has prototypes and analogies in the Swedish material (Allan 1982; Jansson 1986, p. 97; Hedenstierna-Jonsson & Holmquist Olausson 2006, p. 33 f). This is interesting as Nishāpūr, which was founded by the Sasanians in the 3rd century, was an important trading city on the Silk Road in the Samanid era.¹⁹ Regarding the nomad link it must be noted that the kind of warrior belts and horse equipment that became popular among the Rus elite are

found both in pre-Islamic Iran and in the Turkic areas further to the east in Mongolia. They became widely spread across the Eurasian steppes during the Turkic expansion and were also used by Turkic soldiers in the Samanid Empire and in the following era of the Ghaznavids (Jansson 1977, pp. 390, 406). If the influence on Viking clothing came from Turkic groups it could therefore either have come about through contacts with nomads north of the Black Sea or east of the Caspian Sea.

Another strong indication of Northern European involvement in Silk Road trade are recent analyses of the origin of Medieval trade goods in China. 10th to 11th century amber artefacts from Liao Dynasty sites in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria have proved to be Baltic imports (Beck & Stout 1999a, pp. 167–172; unpublished lab report 1999b; Xu Xiaodong 2007, pp. 38–44; 2009 and personal communication 2016).²⁰ Furthermore, considering the dates of the Samanid coinage, it is interesting to note that amber in Chinese burials starts to appear in greater numbers around the turn of the 9th century, then increases significantly in the 10th to 11th centuries before it abruptly disappears in the 12th century (So 2013, pp. 86–97). That time span coincides remarkably well with Rus trading activities in and with Central Asia, especially until the turn of the 11th century.²¹

The Toghozghor, the Uighurs and Liao Dynasty China

If the Rus really were involved in trade further east of the Caspian Sea, with whom did they trade? Ibn Khordādhbeh ends his eastern itinerary with the “Yourts of the Toghozghor”, which is an important clue. Elsewhere he explains that the Toghozghor were a Turkic people neighbouring China whose ruler had “a golden tent on top of his palace that could shelter 100 people” (BGA VI, p. 22). Marquart and others have pointed out that *Toghozghor* was the Arab designation for the Uighurs, although the term could include other Turkic groups as well (Marquart 1903, pp. 91, 390; Barthold 1937, p. 13, see especially Minorsky 1937, pp. 263–277). The link to the Uighurs is at this time not unlikely considering their political position and role in Early Medieval Silk Road trade. In the 8th and 9th centuries, the ail-

ing Tang China gradually lost influence in Central Asia, which allowed the Uighur Empire to rise to power and wealth due to their control of the Silk Road trade. This empire collapsed in the 840s (Drompp 2005), but the Uighurs remained important as intermediates in the Silk Road trade.

In the mid to late 10th century the Qhara-khanids (disputed, but possibly also of Uighur origin) and the Ghaznavids became new important Turkic players and maintained intense trading contacts with China. After the fall of the Tang Dynasty, the Qidans (Khitans) became these Turkic groups’ primary eastern trading partners (Bosworth 2001, pp. 578–583; Biran 2004, pp. 621–628). The Qidan formed the Liao Dynasty (916–1125) in northern China, whose rule reached from Inner Mongolia to Manchuria. The Qidan elite was strongly influenced by both the Han Chinese and their western neighbours, and their graves are particularly rich in amber (Xu 2007; 2009; So 2013). We know from contemporary sources that this product was imported to China from the West and that Turkic tribes, especially the Uighurs, were involved in this trade.²² This means that we can link the Toghozghor with trade in at least one Baltic commodity. Whether the amber reached the Uighurs and the Qidans through direct trade or through middlemen is another matter, but it indicates that there may be some truth in Ibn Khordādhbeh’s reference to the Rus in this passage after all.

Apart from the important indications mentioned above, there is currently little additional archaeological evidence for Viking trade in the regions further to the east of the Caspian Sea, but that may be because we have not been looking for it. Considering the Arabic sources, the apparent contemporary increase of Baltic amber in China, nomad influence on Viking clothing, and the innumerable Transoxanian coin hoards in Scandinavia, more research is needed to understand the Rus’ role in the trading networks of Medieval Central Asia. Few attempts, if any, have been made to look for archaeological evidence in eastern Central Asia for connections to early Rus trade. It may therefore prove worthwhile to re-examine existing reports and material in Mongolia and China to look for further indications.

Conclusion

I find it quite possible that Ibn Khordādhbeh believed that the Rus travelled to China. He may have exaggerated their importance, he may have gone too far in his conclusions about the scope of their trading activities, but the fact remains: looking at the text, it is more likely that he was referring to the Rus' rather than the Radhanites' travels. Alternatively he may have been referring to both Radhanite and Rus trade routes in the passage discussed here. Furthermore, other written sources as well as the archaeological material confirm the importance of Rus trade with Central Asia and their presence at many of the locations mentioned by Ibn Khordādhbeh. That stands in marked contrast to the Radhanites, on whom we have very little data.

Yet, let us remember that the previous translations did not lack a certain logic. It is understandable that de Goeje, Marquart, Jacobs, Pritsak and Golden in their time made the interpretations they did. Furthermore, the Rus were certainly not the only players involved in long-distance trade in this era. Excavations in both Eastern Europe and Central Asia show that the emerging trading centres of the time became increasingly multi-ethnic in character, and goods could travel far through many hands. The long-distance eastern expeditions seem to have become more sporadic by the 11th century, and the trading networks likely changed character along with the political developments over the period when the Vikings were active. What this research and the archaeological material so far indicate, though, is that we have definite reason to look at this particular passage in Ibn Khordādhbeh's text with new eyes. If the author indeed attributed the "land travels" to the Rus, we may have to reconsider our present views about the extent of their eastward trade.

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Notes

¹ “They journey from west to east, from east to west, partly on land, partly by sea. They transport from the west eunuchs, female and male slaves, silk, castor, marten and other furs, and swords. They take ship in the land of the Franks, on the Western Sea, and steer for Farama (Pelusium). There they load their goods on the backs of camels and go by land to Kolzum (Suez) in five days' journey over a distance of twenty-five parasangs. They embark in the East Sea (Red Sea), and sail from Kolzum to El-Jar (port of Medina) and Jeddah (port of Mecca); then they go to Sind, India, and China. On their return they carry back musk, aloes, camphor, cinnamon, and other products of the Eastern countries to Kolzum, and bring them to Farama, where they again embark on the Western Sea. Some make sail for Constantinople to sell their goods to the Romans; others go to the palace of the king of the

Franks to place their goods. Sometimes these Jew merchants prefer to carry their goods from the land of the Franks in the Western Sea, making for Antioch (at the mouth of the Orontes); thence they go by land to Al-Jabia (?), where they arrive after three days' march. There they embark on the Euphrates for Bagdad, and then sail down the Tigris to al-Obolla. From al-Obolla they sail for Oman, Sind, Hind, and China.” (Jacobs 1919, pp. 194–196).

- ² Both Sprenger and Meynard used the then only known copy of the Arabic text, the MS Huntington 433 in Oxford. De Meynard states in his work that his fellow countryman Joseph Toussaint Reinaud made the first translation of this passage. However, Reinaud, who like Sprenger, brought up the section on Rus and Radhanite trade as examples on distant trade exchanges in Arabic sources, probably used Sprenger's English translation. Reinaud's was the first into French, though (de Meynard 1865, 512–513 n; Reinaud 1848, tome 1, pp. LVIII–LIX).
- ³ De Goeje writes: “Il m'est impossible de déterminer l'intervalle qui sépare ce manuscrit de l'autographe, mais je le crois très court”, *BGA VI*, p. XVIII.
- ⁴ Marquart writes that “Es ist selbstverständlich, dass diese beiden grossen Landwege nur den jüdischen Kaufleuten aus Spanien und Süd-Frankreich zugeschrieben werden, wie auch de Goeje in einer kurzen Note zu seiner Übersetzung angedeutet hat.”
- ⁵ The first translator of the section, Aloys Sprenger, also believed that Ibn al-Faqīh and Ibn Khordādhbeh used the same original source. However, Sprenger commented that the latter part of the text was “corrupted” in al-Faqīh's version and could “easily be corrected from the passage of Ibn Khordādhbeh” (Sprenger 1844, p. 526 n).
- ⁶ The section refers to the Kurds. See also the translation by Henri Masse in *Abrégé du Livre des pays* (1973, p. 15 in the open edition version).
- ⁷ In the latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Brill Online 2006) Golden repeats this view that the passage on the Rus “interrupts” the notice on the Radhanites.
- ⁸ I will not complicate things further by involving the question about the Slavs and the possible formation of a Rus state. In this essay I am only focusing upon whether or not Ibn Khordādhbeh himself meant that the disputed passage should concern the Rus. Interestingly, however, Birkeland points out that there was never a question of any Rus state in Ibn Khordādhbeh's work because to him they were primarily merchants, like their contemporaries, the Radhanites (Birkeland 1954, p. 11).

- 9 The Arabic text is also published next to the French in his book, making it easy to follow up, check and compare the original with the translation. In contrast to de Goeje, however, the publication only consists of extracts from the Ibn Khordādhbeh text. Importantly though, there seem to be some differences between the Arabic text in his book compared to the de Goeje volume.
- 10 This view was also held by Thomas S. Noonan who stated that “Since the Rādhāniyyah do not appear to have been mentioned in later sources, it is possible that the emergence of the Rūs-Khazar-Islamic trade starting in the late eighth-early ninth centuries somehow disrupted and perhaps even replaced this northern route of the Rādhāniyyah” (Noonan 1992, p. 250).
- 11 Montgomery’s translation of the passage reads: “Their Land Route: those on a[n] expedition emerge from al-Andalus or from Firanja and cross to al-Sus al Aqsa, then proceed to Tanja, Ifriqiya, Egypt, al-Ramla, Damascus, Kufa, Baghdad, Basra, al-Ahwaz, Fars, Kirman, al-Sind, al-Hind, and [finally] to al-Sin. Sometimes they take [the route] behind Rumiyya, in the territory of the Saqaliba, on to Khamlij, the city of the Khazar, then by the Sea of Jurjan, to Balkh, Transoxania, the Wurut (the grazing lands, the *Ust-Yurt*) of the Toghuzghuz, and to al-Sin.” (Montgomery 2010, p. 155)
- 12 Montgomery refers to the French Arabist Charles Pellat’s 1960 article on the Radhanites in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Pellat there suggests that the section on the Rus “is possibly an interpolation owed to a copyist, but it is equally possible that the author himself has inserted a few lines regarding these merchants; this would then be one of those intercalations through association of ideas which are such a feature of mediaeval Arab writings [...]”. Although convinced that the Radhanites actually existed, Pellat then gives quite a good summary of the debate about this group, for which we have much less information than about the Rus.
- 13 This translation into English is from P.B. Golden (2006). I have omitted or changed some of the notes given by Golden to make it easier to read. The version in de Goeje’s translation reads: “Les Russes, qui appartiennent aux peuples slaves, se rendent, des régions les plus éloignées de Çaklaba (le pays des Slaves), vers la mer romaine, et y vendent des peaux de castor et de renard noir, ainsi que des épées. Le prince des Romains prélève un dixième sur leurs marchandises. – Ou bien, ils descendent le Tanais (Don), le fleuve des Slaves, et passent par Khamlydj, la capitale des Khazares, où le souverain du pays prélève sur eux un dixième. Là ils s’embarquent sur la mer de Djordjân (la Caspienne) et se dirigent sur tel point de la côte qu’ils ont en vue. Cette mer a 500 parasanges de diamètre. Quelquefois ils transportent leurs marchandises, à dos de chameau, de la ville de Djordjân à Bagdad. Ici les eunuques slaves leur servent d’interprètes. Ils prétendent être chrétiens et payent la capitation comme tels.” (*BGA VI*, pp. 115-116).
- 14 An exact literal translation from the Arabic is difficult to make. Birkeland’s version would also work. However, “fa-’ammā” in this context is best translated by using the word “concerning”. Pers. comm. Elie Wardini and Amanda Walldoff 2016.
- 15 al-Bakrī and Ibn al-’Idhārī also mention the attack on Seville (see Birkeland 1954, pp. 65, 108 f).
- 16 Ibn al-Qūṭīya mentions Rus’ travels to Alexandria after a description of the attack on Seville.
- 17 The exact percentage mentioned by Hovén is 57.2%. However, the figure is actually most likely about 60% as a number of coins with as yet undetermined origin are probably Samanid; pers. comm. Gert Rispling 2006 and Cecilia von Heijne 2016.
- 18 As already Arne pointed out (1914, pp. 226, 228), later a local production of these mounts began also in northern Russia, the East Baltic, Finland and Sweden (Jansson 1977, p. 398 f, 408).
- 19 The exchanges between the Samanids, eastern Europe and Scandinavia are also seen in the period’s art. This aspect, and the influence that the Samanid Empire and its Turkic successors had on the Early Medieval economies, have to a large degree been neglected in Western research. Instead the predominant focus has been on southern/central Iran and the Mediterranean region. See Michailidis 2012, especially p. 322 f.
- 20 Beck’s and Stout’s informative studies are – as far as I know – the only chemical analysis of this kind done on Liao Dynasty amber. Xu Xiaodong’s long experience of researching Liao and Song Dynasty amber, as well as her studies of ancient Chinese sources confirm that the Baltic Sea is the most probable source for this commodity in China at that time. However, it would be valuable if new and extended chemical analyses could be made on amber artefacts found throughout China to definitely prove this interesting connection and to help map the spread of Baltic amber. A comparison should then also be made with material from the Dnieper area, which was a known source of amber in the Viking Period as well (see Rybina 1978/1994). See also Beck (1995, pp. 125-127) who gives a background to how the origins of amber have been studied and understood over the years.

- ²¹ The inflow of Samanid silver coins to Scandinavia shrank dramatically in the mid-10th century. The reason for this change has been much debated, but is currently attributed mainly to debased coinage: the lowered silver content of the coins would have caused Rus traders to reject them. This does not necessarily mean that trade came to a halt – excavations in Sweden show that trading centres in Gotland and Öland continued to grow in the 11th century and stayed active into the 12th century. New trading partners appeared as well, such as Frisian merchants who became increasingly active in the Baltic region (Jonsson 2009, pp. 57–66). Political change may also have played a role, such as possibly an early development of a Russian state, a view held primarily by Russian scholars (see, for instance, Kovalev in press.).

However, contacts with both Russia and Byzantium were still lively, and rune stones in Sweden show that long-distance eastern expeditions continued well into the 11th century, although they likely became more sporadic (Jansson 1977, p. 399).

- ²² Marvazī (c. 1120) states that “Slavonic amber” is imported “because in China amber is blackish and there is no demand for it, but there is a demand for the genuine one for their ornaments” (Minorsky 1942, p. 16 f). Chinese sources reveal that especially the Uighurs were involved in bringing amber to China, but also mention Persian and Arabic envoys that brought tributes (Laufer 1907, pp. 239–241; Xu Xiaodong 2007; 2009, p. 246).