CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THE VIKINGS AND ISLAM

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The main sources at hand studying the contacts between the Vikings and Islam are documentary sources, Arabic coins and archaeological objects.

THE DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

Old Norse sources, including runic inscriptions that tell about Viking relations to the east during the Viking Age, never mention direct contacts with the Islamic world. Far more information is found in the Arabic written sources. The authors were geographers, diplomats, missionaries or merchants.

The two – and only – Arabs that we know by name who reached Scandinavia both came from Spain. The Arab diplomat al-Ghazal, in the year 845, gives a description of what must be Scandinavia. He says that people here once were *majûs* (Vikings), but were now Christians. People on some islands further north were still worshipping their old religion. The first land was probably Denmark that for a period had converted to Christianity, 'the islands' are interpreted as present-day Norway (Wikander 1978). Around 970 the Spanish Arab, al-Tartuschi, visited Hedeby. He described the town and its people: it was a big town, poor and dirty. The people lived on fish, were singing like howling dogs and worshipped Sirius (Piltz 1998: 29).

Ibn Horradadbeh was the first Arab writer, between 844 and 848, to mention the people ar-Rus and Scandinavia (Birkeland 1954: 10 f.). He speaks of ar-Rus and their roads to the east, the commodities they brought with them and that they were taxed. He also tells that ar-Rus often took their commodities by camel the last part of the way to Baghdad. And he says: 'They pass them off as Christians.' This story tells us that the Vikings went as far as the capital of the Caliphate and that it was probably easier to do so when they claimed to be Christians. Islam, Christianity and Judaism are all 'book religions' with one god and their people lived in peaceful neighbourliness. The polytheistic Norse religion was reckoned as infidelity, and Vikings belonging to that religion would have had far greater problems trading with the Caliphate.

The most famous Arabic source concerning the descriptions of the Vikings is Ibn Fadlan who wrote an account of a journey from Baghdad to the Volga Bulgars in 921–2. His main task was to spread the Muslim faith to this people (Wikander 1978). He tells

that he saw among these people 5,000 men and women, who had all converted to Islam. They were called *al-baringâr*, which is interpreted as an Arabic rendering of the Old Norse name *væringar*, another name for Vikings (Lewicki 1972: 12; Wikander 1978: 21). Ibn Fadlan built a mosque of wood for them to perform Islamic service and he taught them to pray. There are some difficulties in interpreting this part of the Arabic source (*ibid.*). It is, however, interesting if Vikings really were converted to Islam in Volga Bulgar, although the number of converted is probably highly overstated. It is tempting to speculate if any of these Vikings ever went back to Scandinavia and brought their Islamic faith with them. The Vikings obviously settled along the River Volga, built their houses and traded with the Volga Bulgars (Wikander 1978: 63).

Several Arabic writers tell about the Khazar society (Wikander 1978: 71 f.; Birkeland 1954: 33–4, 49 f.). The best information is given by al-Mas'udi (written 947). In their capital Itil lived Muslims, Christians, Jews and pagans. Their king converted to Judaism. Among the pagans al-Mas'udi mentions as-Saqaliba (Slavs) and ar-Rus (Vikings) who lived in this city. The different religious groups had their own judges, using their own laws. The Muslims had their mosque. They were mainly occupied by trade and handicraft (Birkeland 1954: 33–4). The land of the Khazars has thus also been an important meeting place between Vikings, Muslims and people of other religions. The fact that Vikings lived here more permanently must have given them a clear impression of what Islam meant.

Many of the Arabic descriptions of the Vikings must be understood on the bases of different religions and customs related to religious practice. One such aspect is the way the Arabs looked upon the lack of cleanliness among the Vikings: they did not wash after having relieved themselves, after having intercourse or after a meal. Ibn Fadlan obviously believed that a stranger who did not perform the daily five ritual ablutions as Muslims are obliged to do, was terribly filthy (Wikander 1978).

Amin Râzi, describing Rûs among the Volga Bulgars, says that they highly valued pork. Even those who had converted to Islam aspired to it and were very fond of pork (Wikander 1978: 73). We know that Muslims are not allowed to eat pork. The Spanish Arab Abu Hamid who visited Bulgar in the twelfth century complained that it was very cold and there were only four-hour days during winter and twenty-hour days in summer. When he visited Bulgar, Ramadan – the Muslim's month of fasting – came in summer. As the fasting is set to last all day when the sun is shining, Abu Hamid admitted he had to abstain from fasting (Wikander 1978: 78–9).

Women had a free position in Viking society. They were allowed to marry and divorce on their own will. According to Amin Râzi, referred to by Ibn Fadlan, Rûs did not look upon having intercourse in public as a shame (Wikander 1978: 73). This was most common between men and their bondswomen. Muslims were allowed to have several wives and concubines, but their sex life was a highly private matter.

When Ibn Fadlan described the Vikings in Volga Bulgar he also mentioned that Rûs had idols: long poles with human-like faces dug into the ground. This is in contrast to Muslims who are not allowed to depict human faces. Many Arab writers tell of ar-Rûs who burn their dead, again in contrast to their own custom of burying them in the ground. A discussion between a Viking and a Muslim on their different burial customs, told by Ibn Fadlan, is interesting: 'You Arabs are really stupid. You take the man who you love and honour most of all and dig him into the ground where insects and worms are eating him. We [the Rûs] burn him on a fire in a moment and he goes

immediately to Paradise.' Another contrast between Old Norse religion and Islam is that the Vikings buried their dead with a lot of their equipment, whereas the Muslims left nothing with the dead. Well known is Ibn Fadlan's description of the rich boat burial. Ibn Miskawaih wrote about the Rûs raid on the trading town of Barda'a in Azerbaijan in 943 including the burial custom of al-Rûs. Then he says: 'The Muslims, after the Rûs had left, were looking into their graves and picked out their swords that were in great demand up to this day because they are so bright and of such an exquisite quality' (Birkeland 1954). This is difficult to see as other than regular grave robbery by the Muslims.

Many of the Arab writers tell about trade relations between Vikings and Arabs, directly or with Russians, Volga Bulgars or Khazars as middlemen (Birkeland 1954: 16, 29, 50). The Vikings brought slaves (male and female), fur of sable, black fox, grey squirrel, beaver and ermine, the tusk of walrus, honey and beeswax, amber and weapons of good quality (Duczko 1998: 107). What the Vikings got in return, according to the Arab written sources, were Arabic silver coins, dirhams, which were the main object of exchange, beads, luxury clothing and silk (Jansson and Nosov 1992: 80).

It was not only through trade that Arab objects reached other people. Gift exchange was also of great importance. When the Spanish Arab al-Ghazal visited the Danish king in 845 he brought gifts: chests containing clothes and vessels. On his journey from Baghdad to the Volga Bulgars Ibn Fadlan gave gifts to the different people he stayed with. Islamic costumes, jackets and caftans are mentioned, obviously gifts for men. Women were given a veil or a signet ring. Other gifts mentioned are pieces of textile, shoes, beads, perfume, etc. Ibn Fadlan tells that Muslim tradesmen had to start a friendly relationship with someone who would accommodate him when doing business in foreign countries. The host and his wife are given gifts of the kind mentioned (Wikander 1978). This is one way that Vikings also may have got goods of Arabic origin.

Another way of obtaining goods was by raiding and plundering. The Arab sources speak of Viking expeditions to Arab territory, mainly around the Caspian Sea, attacking several towns (Kromann and Roesdahl 1996: 10). Well known is also the Viking raid against Seville in Spain in 843/4, where they took prisoners, plundered and killed. New attacks were carried out in different parts of Spain early in the tenth century (Birkeland 1954: 13, 38).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBJECTS AND COINS OF ARAB ORIGIN FOUND IN SCANDINAVIA

A considerable number of Viking Age archaeological finds testify to contacts with the Arabic world: they are known as 'oriental imports'. These artefacts have been interpreted as expressions of trade (Arne 1914; Jansson 1985, 1987, 1988). Is it possible that ideas and religious concepts associated with these objects also reached Scandinavia?

The largest and possibly also the most important group of artefacts demonstrating the connections between the Arab world and Viking Age Scandinavia are the Arabic or Cufic coins, mostly silver dirhams. About 85,000 coins have been found in Sweden, most of them in silver hoards on the islands of Gotland and Öland (Hovén 1981). Nearly 700 come from Norway (Khazaei 2004), 5,000 from Denmark (Kromann 1990). About 100,000 have been found in Russia (Noonan 1998). A few of the coins come from the

Arabic colonies in Spain and the western Mediterranean. The stream of coins started at the end of the eighth century and reached a climax during the tenth; it came to an almost total stop around AD 1015 (Hovén 1985).

The Cufic coins provide information, written in Arabic, of the name of the person who had ordered the coin to be struck, the caliph, the mint master, the place and year of minting. In addition the coins bear quotations from the Quran (Hovén 1985: 74 f.). These quotations were reminders of central parts of the Islamic doctrines for their own fellow believers. The Muslim traders and officials were the most active missionaries during the Viking Age. Bearing this in mind, it seems natural that the exchange medium, the coins, should act as small, yet important 'missionary tracts'.

We know of several cases of graffiti and inscriptions on the Arabic coins which reached northern Europe. Although the significance of these has in some cases been overstated, especially as concerns the runes, there is no doubt about this being an important source. Some studies on the Swedish and Russian material have been carried out (Hammarberg and Rispling 1985; Dobrovolskij *et al.* 1991). The most common types of graffiti and inscriptions on Arabic coins are oriental and runic inscriptions, objects such as weapons and boats, and religious and magic symbols. Most graffiti were probably made in Scandinavia, some possibly also in Scandinavian Russia.

I have investigated graffiti among about 15,000 Arabic coins found in Sweden, concentrating on religious signs and symbols. I found 12 instances of Þórr's hammers and 28 coins with graffiti which were interpreted as Christian crosses of various types (Mikkelsen 1998: figs 7–8). The year of minting of these coins lay between AD 814 and 970.

Why were Þórr's hammers and Christian crosses scratched across the quotations from the Quran? Islam must have been a well-known religion among Vikings travelling in the east. It is likely that they knew some of the main aspects of the Islamic doctrine, and must surely also have been aware of the fact that the Arabic texts found on the coins conveyed messages from this religion. When our ancestors scratched Þórr's hammers and crosses on the surface of the Arabic coins, they must presumably have wanted to show that they dissociated themselves from the other faith, Islam. During the Viking Age, people of northern Europe tried, for some reason or other, to render the quotations from the Quran harmless, or to confront Allah with their own Norse or Christian god, by scratching their symbols over the Islamic messages.

Arabic inscriptions or imitations of that writing have also been observed on artefacts found in Scandinavia other than coins, as follows.

Five bottle-shaped bronze vessels have been found, four in Sweden and one on Åland (Jansson 1988: 646; Mikkelsen 1998: 41 f.). Two were used as containers for coin hoards, mostly Cufic coins, three come from richly equipped graves. These bronze vessels were probably made in the late ninth or the tenth century. T.J. Arne (1932: 104 f.) has suggested west Turkestan, Samarqand or Bukhara as their place of origin. One of the bronze vessels, from Aska, Hagebyhöga, Östergötland bears a conventionalised Arabic inscription. It has been transcribed and reads as follows: *el-fadl el-akmal wa- (l-a) san qabisa, lillah*: 'The most perfect beneficent and most beautiful gift [is] for God.' It is thought that the inscription was added to the bronze bottle at a later date, probably by someone not familiar with Arabic letters (Arne 1932: 107). The bronze vessel from Bertby, Saltvik, Åland is very similar to the vessel from Aska, and the two are thought to have been made at the same place. Even the inscriptions are almost

identical. They were probably made by the same person: a man in Bulgar (Arne 1932: 108).

Vessels of this kind were normally used as water jugs in Islam, for purifying water used for ritual ablution before praying. The Scandinavia find contexts do not support the hypothesis that the function came north together with the object. Both context and function changed.

A cast bronze object with openwork plant ornamentation, interpreted as a censer, was found together with a fragment of an oil lamp and three glow tongs at Åbyn, Hamrånge, Gästrikland, Sweden. The censer probably comes from the province of Khorasan in Iran, and should be dated to the late ninth century (Ådahl 1990). It may have come from a prosperous home, but we cannot rule out the possibility that it was connected with religious activities. The censer bears two inscriptions in Arabic: *bi'ism Allah* 'in the name of God', and: *rahim* 'merciful'. These inscriptions relate the objects to the Islamic faith in some way or other.

In the rich female Birka grave 515 a finger-ring with an amethyst was found. The stone bore the legend 'Allah' engraved in Arabic. Finger-rings with semi-precious stones of this kind are common in Russia, among the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars and also in the Caliphate (Duczko 1998: figs 7–9). From the Arab written sources we know that rings like this were common gifts from Muslim traders to people in the east, especially women.

Among objects from the Arab world reaching Scandinavia during the Viking Age were balances and weights. This shows the importance of trade between the two, and many archaeologists have suggested that the Viking Age weight system in parts of Scandinavia originated from the Arabic system (Sperber 1996). Most common in Viking Age graves are the weights made of lead or bronze/brass. Some of them display pseudo-Arabic symbols or letters on the poles (Mikkelsen 1998: fig. 4). On one of them, from Nysätra, Gotland, we may read: *rasûl Allah* 'Allah's prophet', and: *bakh* 'choice'. The latter text occurs also on two other weights, and may be seen as a kind of warranty quality. Many of the Birka graves in Sweden from the period AD 890–930 contained weights belonging to the Islamic weight system. Sperber (1996: 104–7) believes that Muslim people most probably stayed at Birka during that period.

Costumes and costume accessories of different kinds are one of the biggest group of artefacts of Islamic origin in Scandinavia. Many graves, especially in Birka, have yielded textiles deriving from so-called 'oriental' costumes; this applies to women's as well as to men's burials. Silk and other textiles and ornaments of gold and silver, as well as fur trimmings, are interpreted as part of such 'oriental' costumes (Jansson 1988).

Agnes Geijer (1938) saw these as foreign luxury goods which the individual Viking trader had acquired during his travels in the east. Anne-Sofie Gräslund (1980: 80 f.) interpreted the rich chamber graves of Birka, often containing luxury costumes, as probably representing the burials of Scandinavians as well as foreign traders and their wives. Inga Hägg (1983) is more inclined to regard these garments as symbols of rank, belonging to people who were in close contact with the Byzantine court, with the court in Kiev probably acting as an important intermediator.

If we return to the written Arabic sources, we have seen that gift exchange between Arabs and other people included Islamic costumes, sometimes with embroidered gold or made of silk, jackets, caftans and veils. Using these sources as models, it is obvious that all the above interpretations may be possible.

One group of artefacts which has been found in a great many Viking Age graves in Scandinavia consists of rock-crystal and carnelian beads (Jansson 1988: 584 f., 633 f.). Certain types may have been produced in Gujarat, India, but other places of origin have also been suggested. Beads like these were used as votive gifts in Buddhist cultures, and as rosary beads in Islam. When the beads came to Scandinavia during the Viking Age, Gujarat had been conquered by the Muslims. It thus seems likely that they came to Scandinavia as part of the Arabic trade. However, we have at present no indications of any religious ideas or functions linked to the beads in their original context having come to Scandinavia. Here they are usually found in women's graves, as parts of necklaces.

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