

Yurts and huts

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Abu Zayd al-Sirafi and Ibn
Fadlan

TWO ARABIC TRAVEL BOOKS
Accounts of China and India and Mission
to the Volga

Tim Mackintosh-Smith and James E. Montgomery,
editors and translators

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The Library of Arabic Literature series makes available important works of Arabic literature in good modern English translations, each with a new or revised edition of the Arabic text on facing pages. Funded by the Abu Dhabi Institute of New York University, the volumes are simply but elegantly produced, and the Arabic font used in all of them is exceptional for its clarity and beauty.

The two works in this volume are travel accounts produced in the ninth and early tenth centuries which show the growing interest of contemporary Muslims in the peoples who lived beyond the frontiers of the Dar al-Islam.

The first of these is an account, or rather two combined, of the sea routes to China. This is essentially a description of the routes taken by Muslim traders – real-life Sinbads if you will – from Basra, Siraf and other ports in the Gulf, first to southern India, then to the Malay Straits and finally to the great port of Khanfu, the modern trading metropolis of Guangzhou. Here, in the mid-ninth century, there was a major trading colony, administered by a Muslim official appointed by the Chinese Emperor. The text is sober and matter-of-fact, but it presents a world of exotic trade goods: beautifully embroidered silks and ambergris, the key ingredient of exotic perfumes, which were a staple of luxury trade in the Abbasid world of the time. But the authors, both the anonymous writer of the first half of the texts and Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, the author of the second, are keenly

interested in the behaviour and customs of all the peoples they meet, and above all of the Chinese. Here we have the first description of China by outsiders, and many of the features they comment on become familiar tropes in later writing: the industriousness and manual skills of the people and the level of imperial control of commerce as well as more mundane matters such as the regulation of prostitutes and the drinking of tea. There is even an account of an interview between a Muslim merchant and the Emperor, in which the sovereign is portrayed as acknowledging the Abbasid caliph as the greatest of the world's rulers, followed by the Emperor himself, the Byzantine Emperor and an Indian ruler.

The narratives describe an open and tolerant commercial world. The manners of the Chinese and other peoples are set out in a careful, non-judgemental tone. Of course Muslims are superior because they believe in Allah and his Prophet, but other peoples have their virtues and their qualities too. Sadly this was all about to change. From 874, China was convulsed by a major and prolonged rebellion which resulted in, among other calamities, the massacre of the foreign merchants in Khanfu and the effective cutting off of all commercial links. By the time Abu Zayd was putting together the second half of the account, he was describing a world which was no more than a

distant memory. It was to be three centuries before direct commerce between the Islamic world and China was resumed, though Muslim merchants continued to trade with India and along the east coast of Africa.

The second account is different in many ways. Rather than a description of a system compiled from a variety of different sources, this is a first-hand narrative of an arduous journey with vivid descriptions of the hardships and dangers the author confronted. In 921, when the power of the Abbasid caliphate in Iraq was collapsing, a letter arrived in Baghdad

from the King of the Volga Bulgars, who had decided to accept Islam (in contrast to the western Bulgars who, of course, embraced orthodox Christianity). He requested religious instruction and funds to build a castle to defend himself in this world of felt yurts and wooden huts. As in much of early medieval Europe, monotheism and masonry were closely linked. The Caliph and his advisers responded by organizing a mission to these remote and little-understood areas. Ibn Fadlan, a well-educated but otherwise undistinguished member of the Baghdad bureaucracy, was chosen as secretary. Whether he was ordered to keep a record or simply took it upon himself to do so, we cannot know, but he produced a compelling account which is, among other things, the earliest first-hand description of travel from the Muslim world.

The expedition went first to Central Asia, where, as representatives of the Caliph, they were well received by the local Samanid ruler in Bukhara. Then the hard part started: they travelled north through the icy, life-threatening cold of a central Russian winter. When they reached the King, they were warmly received at first but relations cooled when the King discovered that the money promised in the Caliph's letter was not to be found (in fact, it had been embezzled, though not by Ibn Fadlan, en route). The mission left under a cloud.

There then followed the episode that has established Ibn Fadlan's narrative as a major historical source. He and his companions, those who had not gone home to the creature

comforts of Baghdad, visited the camp of northern merchants he described as the "Rusiyya" who brought with them slaves to sell in the Central Asian market. This seems to be the earliest first-hand account of the Rus/Russians and, ever since the discovery of the full manuscript of Ibn Fadlan's account in the 1930s, it has been debated and discussed by historians wanting to understand who these people were and how they lived.

This inquiry is enlivened by the sensational, even lurid, account of what our pious and bourgeois Baghdadi informant saw. The simple

paganism of the people he treated with a certain mild ridicule, but he was much more interested in their sexual mores, particularly their custom of openly enjoying their slave girls in

front of their friends and visiting merchants. The climax of the account is the description of the funeral of a great man and the sacrifice of a slave girl to accompany him to the afterlife. Her death and the cremation of the man in his boat with all his most valued possessions is described in horrified yet fascinated detail. Here, as with the accounts of the Chinese customs in Abu Zayd's narrative, the approach is not to condemn their wickedness or savagery, but to note how far their behaviour departs from polite Muslim norms.

Both these accounts are full of fascination and wonder. Tim Mackintosh-Smith and James E. Montgomery provide excellent introductions and critical notes, not just at the basic historical level, but also in a more literary and imaginative mode, situating the works in a wider, more global context. These volumes continue the contribution this excellent series is making towards integrating classics of Arabic into the global canon.