

Early Contacts between Scandinavia and the Orient

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I

"Between East and West": A Research Program on Contacts between Scandinavia and the Caucasus

Contacts between Scandinavia, the Orient and the Silk Route varied in importance over time, with one of the most intense periods of exchange occurring from the late Vendel period into the Viking Age (especially the 8th – 10th centuries CE). After that, the contacts almost ceased, with the exception of minor journeys, of which that by the Swedish Viking chieftain Ingvar the Far-Traveller in the 11th century to the Caucasus became the most famous. These contacts have left a substantial archaeological record in Scandinavia: coins, silk, colour pigments, textiles and many other artefacts. The contacts also brought cultural influences resulting in the spread of new technology and ideas. The presence of Scandinavian artefacts and burials along the Silk Route branch through the Caucasus has not previously been studied, largely because of the political barriers to research exchange before the 1990s.

The catalyst for pursuing this research was the recent discussion about the journey of Ingvar the Far-Traveller (1036–41). His route was reconstructed by Mats G. Larsson, and in 2004 "Expedition Vittfarne," an experimental journey, was undertaken, following the Neva, Lovat and Dnieper rivers to the Black Sea, and then through the Caucasus by the rivers Rioni, Kvirila, Tscheremila and Mktvari to the Caspian Sea. The expedition stimulated contacts between Swedish and Georgian colleagues and provided an opportunity to examine museum collections. Research seminars were held in connection with the expedition, laying the basis for the further contacts. In subsequent years, there have been several seminars, workshops and expeditions. This has resulted in new knowledge about the



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Fig. 1. Uppland runestone U 654, Varpsund, Övergrans sn., raised by the sons of "Gunnleifr, their father, who was killed in the east with Ingvar... He could steer a cargo-ship well."

extent of contacts and trade and the development of an ambitious research plan outlined here. The second part of this article will provide details of the historical background to Ingvar's journey.

The initial research focussed upon problems related to Ingvar's journey, which is attested in both archaeological and historical sources. It is remarkable that almost one-fourth of all runic inscriptions in Sweden which deal with journeys abroad are ones dedicated to the memory of men who died during Ingvar's expedition [Fig. 1].

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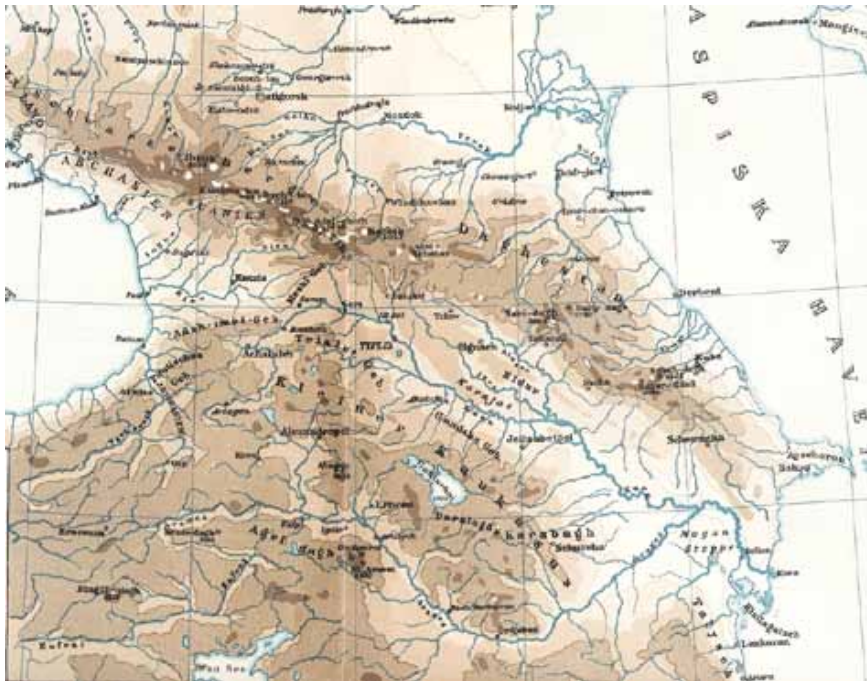


Fig. 2. Map of the Caucasus.

range and then follows the Mktvari/Kura to the Caspian Sea [Figs. 2, 3]. Larger ships could navigate from the Black Sea up to Samtredia. Further upstream, smaller vessels could use the Kvirila and Tschereмила. The trade route follows a wide valley between the north and south Caucasus mountain ridges, both of which include peaks over 5000 m high. The Likhi range connecting those ridges is lower, separating eastern and western Georgia. On the west are the humid areas of the Kolchida lowlands; on the east the

The journey also was described in an Icelandic saga, the only saga devoted to a Swedish Viking chieftain, and in contemporary Georgian chronicles. On their journey back through the Caucasus the members of Ingvar's expedition became involved in Georgian political wars; the written sources indicate the crew died of some disease and was buried along the water route. Several Swedish-type burials were discovered by "Expedition Vittfarne" and two of them excavated in 2005.

The trade route through the Caucasus

The contacts and trade between Scandinavia and the Caucasus is the focus of the project. Ingvar's route followed part of an ancient trade route mentioned already by Pliny and Tacitus and a branch of the so called "Silk Route." From time to time, in periods when other branches of the Silk Route were blocked for political, economic or military reasons, this became one of the most important trade routes between East and West, between Europe and Asia.

The Georgian scholar Tamaz Beradze rediscovered the ancient road across the Likhi mountains, which was the one followed by the Vikings. Used already in Classical times, the trade route from the Black Sea follows the rivers Rioni, Kvirila and Tcheremila, crosses the Likhi

dryer Kura-Aras lowland which continues through present-day Azerbaijan to the Caspian.

The Likhi range has sometimes constituted a natural border. In the Classical period, the ancient Kingdom of Colchis lay in what is today western Georgia. Here the river Rioni, the ancient Phasis, was the main channel for communication with the town of Phasis beside the river mouth on the Black Sea. Upstream was the town of Vani, where archaeological excavations led by Otar Lordkipanidze and Nino Khoshtaria have demonstrated that it was an important center for trade and religion in the area. Further upstream we also find Kutaisi (antique Aia), the capital of



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Fig. 3. The eroded old route across the Likhi range.

Colchis, and in the Viking age the capital of the Kingdom of Georgia.

East of the Likhi mountain range from the 3rd century BCE to the 5th century CE was the ancient Georgian kingdom of Kartli, which Greek and Roman authors called Iberia. Kartli sometimes served as the political center for the Georgian people, the Kartvelians. The capital was for a long period at Mtskheta and then in the 5th century moved to Tbilisi, just to the east. Beginning in the 6th century it became the focus of rivalry between different foreign powers: Persia, the Byzantine empire, the Khazars and the Arabs. Finally in 738 Arab troops conquered the town and established an Islamic emirate here with Tbilisi as its center. This lasted for three centuries and was the political entity the Viking travellers encountered.

Just as Kolchis and the trading centers lay along the river Rioni in the west, so the towns in Iberia/Kartli centered around the Mktvari (Kura) in the east. To counter the threats from outside powers wishing to control the route, hillforts and fortified castles were built in various periods along the route through the Likhi range. In 2005 our Swedish-Georgian expedition discovered a large settlement along this route, where erosion had uncovered finds such as clay pipes and ceramics dating to the 7th century [Figs. 4, 5] (Beradze 2004; G. Larsson in press). Evidence for the direct contacts between Scandinavia and the Caucasus will be explored in Part II below. Scandinavian trading expeditions, which reached the Caspian Sea and continued either east along the Silk Route or south to Baghdad, were already a regular occurrence by the 9th century. The route through the Caucasus was an important link in this trading network.



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Goals of the project

The aim of the project is to study the contacts between Caucasia and Europe in a long-term perspective, with a focus on cultural relations mirrored in ideology and material culture. The extensive information in written sources — such as annals, geographic accounts, runic inscriptions, and sagas; the languages including Arabic, Georgian, Armenian, Greek, Latin, Russian and old Scandinavian — will be juxtaposed to the evidence from material remains. The archaeological evidence is of particular importance here, since it has never been closely examined. The project team involves specialists in a number of disciplines and regions: technology, metal production, art, architecture, early medieval thought and mentality, religion, textile production, communication, ancient monuments and material culture in Caucasia, the Mediterranean, the Orient, Russia and Scandinavia.

The study of material evidence will include new archaeological survey and excavation and analysis of artefacts already in museum collections.

According to Georgian royal chronicles, in the 1040s the Varangians came to Georgia and took part in domestic struggles between King Bagrat of Georgia and his rebellious vassal Liparit Baghvashi. The best described battle was the one at Sasireti in present west Georgia. To date though, there is no archaeological proof

Fig. 4 (left). Terraces for settlement discovered at Nunisi, Georgia, beside the main trade route across the Likhi mountains.

Fig. 5 (below). Clay pipe from the 7th century found at Nunisi.



of Viking participation in these events. A first step in obtaining evidence will be to survey systematically the route from Bashi (where where the Viking contingent was supposed to have stayed in the 1040s) to Sasireti. The survey work will use data from aerial and satellite photography in order to create a digital map with GIS coordinates on which the archaeological sites and routes of travel can be plotted. Test excavations at Bashi and Sasireti will be undertaken to see whether there are Viking artefacts and other evidence that would merit more systematic archaeological excavation.

A related aspect of the study of communications will be to compare the evidence about early Scandinavian and Georgian boat building technologies, since it is reasonable to posit that the need to construct boats during expeditions would have resulted in some exchange of techniques. Among other things, this study will involve comparative analysis of nautical terminology.

Among the objects in museum collections of particular interest are beads. At many sites in Georgia such as Mtskheta, amber beads have been found. Since there is a strong possibility that the amber came from the Baltic it would be possible to test this hypothesis by laboratory analyses in Scandinavia. In the same way, the origin of the Scandinavian Viking age finds of carnel beads may be traced. Carnel beads were produced on a large scale in Georgia. This investigation may shed new light to Baltic-Caucasian contacts in the Iron Age and medieval period. There is supporting evidence about the Georgian connection in the finds of Georgian coins which have been made in Sweden.

In the realm of technological innovation, an important aspect of the project will be to study the transmission of knowledge about iron manufacture. According to contemporary research, iron technology arrived in Sweden from the Volga River area, where one finds similar furnaces and artefacts. Georgia is considered one of the areas where iron technology was first introduced and accepted. A hypothesis about possible connections between Georgian iron manufacture and that in Sweden can be tested by examining material remains in Georgian

museums and analyzing the archaeological evidence at manufacturing sites. It is possible then that connections can be made between the techniques, qualities of the products, and the like. This empirical study will then be related to current theories on the concepts of innovation and technological choices.

Material culture and belief systems intersect in clothing and textiles. Annika Larsson has already demonstrated that textile fragments found at Viking-age Birka in Sweden originate in the "East" and have close analogies with those from the Caucasus. Further study of this material in juxtaposition with ethnographic documentation may suggest similarities in dress between the two cultures. Of particular interest here will be careful technical analysis of the dyes, for example, *Rubia Tinctura*, which was produced in and exported from Georgia. Pigments derived from substances traded along the routes connecting Asia and Europe also may be analyzed from their traces on wooden objects. There is a great deal to be learned here about color symbolism and its relationship to societal norms where particular colors were markers of position and wealth.

An important part of the project will be to attempt a comparative analysis of societal norms and belief systems in Viking-age Scandinavia and in medieval Georgia. One aspect of this study concerns religious belief and its manifestation in material objects and religious texts. It will be based, first of all, on Georgian and Swedish hagiographic works, the cycles of both "Martyrdoms" and "Lives," and also other kinds of written sources such as annals and sagas. The written evidence can be supplemented with rich archaeological, ethnographic and artistic material. Epigraphic and architectural monuments, specimens of mural painting, miniatures, icon-painting, goldsmiths' work and other branches of art will be used. An examination of architectural remains and icon painting may shed new light on possible cross-cultural borrowing, going beyond iconographic themes and involving material components and techniques. To the extent that one can reconstruct the thought world of the two societies, it may be possible then to learn more than we have to date from the evidence of the written sources they produced — that is,

to understand the characterizations of different ethnic or cultural groups and read not only what is written about them but read from the silences of that which was left unsaid.

II

The Background to Ingvar the Far-Traveller's Journey: the Textual, Archaeological and Artistic Evidence

The famous expedition of Ingvar the Far-Traveller through the Caucasus in the Late Viking Age, an event commemorated in many Swedish rune-stones and an Icelandic saga, followed upon a long period of Scandinavian involvement in the south and east which brought the Vikings to the Caspian Sea and beyond. While much of this earlier history concerning the journeys to Byzantium and to some degree Russia has been well documented, the ongoing work of our project is providing a new research field related to the journeys to the Caucasus, with some of the most interesting evidence coming from analysis of textiles in Swedish collections and in Georgia. New analysis of archaeological material has enhanced our understanding of how the travel to the East became possible. We are only at the beginning of archaeological work in the Caucasus, where we can expect to learn a

great deal more. In this essay, I shall review the source evidence regarding the “pre-history” of Ingvar’s expedition. In a following article the archaeological and historical material related to the expedition itself will be discussed.

The presence of Sasanian coins in Sweden shows that commercial contacts with the Orient were initiated already in the 7th century. The big expansion of the Eastern trade came in the mid-8th century and resulted simultaneously in the establishment of the Viking Age towns Birka in Sweden [Fig. 6] and Staraja Ladoga in Russia along the Eastern trade route. According to the latest dendrochronological datings, both of these were established in the 750s.

There were fundamental changes in the Swedish contacts with the East in the Viking Age that also affected the contacts with the areas along the Silk Route. Ingmar Jansson (2005, p. 39) has made the important observation that the material culture related to the Eastern journeys can be divided into an “older phase” beginning in the 8th century and enduring until the late 10th century, and a “younger phase” that started in the late 10th century and lasted to the mid-12th century. The transition in the late 10th century is associated with political and religious changes, as well as with changes in trade and towns. In Scandinavia, in the “older phase,” the Islamic silver coins dominate as payment in both Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. One of the most obvious expressions of the changes is their

disappearance and replacement by German and English silver coins in the late 10th century. At the same time, Birka is replaced by Sigtuna; and in Russia the oldest Novgorod, Riurikovo gorodishche, disappears, and the present Novgorod is established about 2 km away. Most of the Scandinavian finds in the East belong, according to Jansson, to the “older phase.” [Fig. 7] That they are few in the “younger phase” may be explained by a change in dress, where the typical Scandinavian style is no longer as obvious.

Fig. 6. Reconstruction of a part of Viking-age Birka, model in Birka Museum.



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Fig. 7. Burial of a Viking-age woman, 10th century CE, display in Gotlands Museum. Her accoutrements included typical Gotlandic jewelry, a box-shaped brooch, two animal-shaped brooches, a key, knife and tweezers attached to chains. The brooches in female burials are among the most important “ethnic” identifiers.



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However, another explanation may be that the burial practice changed as a result of Christian influences (Jansson 2005, p. 43). True Scandinavian finds from the “younger phase” are detectable along the Dnieper route [Fig. 8] all the way down to the Black Sea, such as the runic grave-stone from the island Berezan outside the mouth of the Dnieper.

The eastern artefacts in Scandinavia in the “older phase” are, as Jansson has observed, from the eastern Caliphate (Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan), from the Khazar Empire between the lower Dnieper and lower Volga, and from the

Bulgar area in the middle Volga. Comparatively few finds are of Byzantine origin – approximately 600 coins, pendant-crosses and reliquaries, and a few others, and the majority of them are from the ‘younger phase’ (Jansson 2005, p. 44). This is in line with the recent results by Annika Larsson (2005), who has argued that the clothing styles, materials and decoration found in Birka (that is, in the “older phase”) are “Oriental,” not Byzantine. For details see below.

The written sources, such as the Russian Primary Chronicle, tell of predominantly hostile relations with Byzantium in the “older phase,” including repeated attacks from Rus until the 10th century when the first peace treaties and trade agreements were made. Later, in the “younger phase,” the Rus also enter Byzantine military service, and the Rus ruler converts to Christianity in order to marry a Byzantine princess [Fig. 9].

Fig. 8 (left). The Pilgård stone, now in the Gotlands Museum, found next to a Viking-age market and harbor at Bogevisken, commemorates Ravn, who apparently drowned in the Dnieper rapids called Aifur.

Fig. 9. Late 10th-early 12th-century runic inscription in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was left by a Viking-age Scandinavian named Halfdan.



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The Islamic sources in the “older phase” talk about “Rus” and the journeys to the areas around the Caspian Sea, whereas they talk about *warank* in the “younger phase.” And finally, in the Old Russian and Old West Norse early medieval literature the contacts with the Caliphate seem forgotten, and the Byzantine connection stands out as the most important (Jansson 2005, p. 44). The later term *warank* is associated with the Scandinavians in Byzantine military service, which in Russia are called *variag*, in Greece *varangos*, and in Scandinavia *våring*. These Scandinavian warriors are first mentioned (in the Primary Chronicle) as being employed in Byzantium in the second peace treaty between Rus and Byzantium in 944. There we learn that, besides a trade agreement, the Rus ruler should send warriors to the Byzantine emperor to fight against his enemies in the number that the latter requested. This started a new era in the Eastern relations: the contacts and the communication network had begun to change. Further evidence is the work *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae* by Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos, where, in connection with the Rus princess Olga’s visit in 957, the emperor complains that Rus had not sent people to him to the extent they had agreed. The Byzantine Empire had replaced the Orient as the target for the Scandinavian journeys and commercial contacts.

The necessary prerequisite for the contacts: the ships

Changes in boatbuilding technology were the main factor behind the expansion of contacts and trading networks in the Viking Age (G. Larsson 2007). The resulting improvement in the ships made possible long distance journeys from



Fig. 10. The Viks boat rebuilt at the National Maritime Museum Stockholm.

Scandinavia to the areas south of the Aral Sea in the east and “Vinland” America in the west, the northern African coast in the south and Baffin Island in Canada as well as the Arctic Sea in the north.

The well preserved 11th-century Viks boat [Fig. 10], which has been documented, reconstructed and rebuilt by the author, is the only Viking-age ship find in Sweden with almost all of the wooden hull

preserved and thus with a unique potential to inform about Viking-age shipbuilding and the qualities of the ships (G. Larsson 1997, 2000, 2007). The planking in the ship was made from radially split oak, a method that, according to the analysis of wooden fragments attached to rivets in burials, was introduced in the 7th century, the earliest example being the burial boat from Valsgärde grave No. 7, excavated near Uppsala (Arwidsson 1977; G. Larsson 2007) [Fig. 11]. The method enabled the fibres in the wood to remain intact, and, thanks to the strength and pliability of the fibres, the planking could be made much thinner than if it was sawn, in which case the fibres were cut. 10–20 mm is a common thickness of planks in Swedish Viking boats: they have the thinnest planking among the Scandinavian ships and therefore are the lightest ones. Embla, the

Fig. 11. A reconstruction drawing of the boat burial of Valsgärde grave No. 7, Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala.

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reconstruction of a 7.2 m-long burial boat, weighs only 250 kg, and the 9,6 m-long Viks boat replica, 500 kg (G. Larsson 1998, 2006). By contrast, the 8,5 m-long replica boat Krampmacken that was built with modern methods weighs more than 850 kg (Edberg 1993; 1995 a, b; 1996). The light boats were the most important factor behind the success of the Viking raids, where the ships could land anywhere with shallow waters. Since the boats could land anywhere, it was impossible to anticipate where the next attack might fall.

The light boats were the main factor that made possible the far-reaching Eastern trade. As I have shown earlier, analysis of Viking-age Scandinavian boat remains in Russia shows that it was almost exclusively the very light Swedish boats which could be and were used on these trade routes. Shallow rivers, many portages beside the rapids and between the different river systems, made it necessary to have very light boats. In experiments I have shown that boats built with radial splitting of the planks were so light that children and teenagers can pull them on land on rollers placed on portages without difficulty. The replica of the Viks boat was pulled almost one kilometer in one hour by these young people, and the burial boat took only fifteen minutes. By contrast, the experimental boat "Krampmacken," built in the modern way with thicker sawn planks, and thus much heavier, though smaller than the Viks boat, could be pulled on portages only by adult men and with great effort, necessitating the construction of a wheeled carriage for the boat. The portaging of ships by Rus merchant travellers was described already in the 10th century by Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos in his *De Administrando Imperio*, a book instructing his son how to rule the empire and how to deal with the many different peoples living in and around it.

The discouraging results by some experimental archaeologists using modern methods to build the replica boats has caused these scholars to wonder whether the Rus even could travel such distances in Eastern Europe (Edberg 1997, 1998, 1999). My experience with replica boats built with original methods, and similar experiences in Denmark, give completely different results and show that it is possible without effort to use ships of this type on communication routes that

involves many portages. Moreover, these results are also supported by contemporary historical sources that are good evidence about these long-distance journeys. Several contemporaneous Arab authors emphasise that the Rus, who are ethnically different from Slavs, also differ from them in that they come by ships, and that the ships are central in warfare, and raids, as well as trade. One of these authors Ibn Rustah (fl. CE 903–913) writes:

...They have a king who is called khaqan Rus... they make raids against Saqalaba, sailing in ships in order to go out to them, and they take them prisoner and carry them off to Khazar and Bulgar and trade with them there...They have no cultivated lands; they eat only what they can carry off from the land of Saqalaba... their only occupation is trading with sable and grey squirrel and other furs, and in these they trade and they take as price gold and silver and secure it in their belts (or saddle-bags). [transl. by Macartney 1930]

A few decades later, around 950, Constantine Porphyrogenitos described the recently organized trade network between Rus and the Byzantine Empire, which included journeys by boat. The Rus merchants from Novgorod and Kiev travelled north in winter to purchase furs, and returned in spring and bought local boats on which they travelled down the Dnieper to sell their merchandise in Constantinople. The description resembles that of the later, medieval trade journeys from Novgorod to the northern Sámi markets, described by Olaus Magnus (*Historia* 20:2). In Olaus Magnus' time, the 16th century, it was the heirs of the Rus in the East who continued to use the old communication routes and means of travel in lands without roads in northern Scandinavia. Olaus Magnus reported that the Russians on their way to the Torneå market with furs 'sometimes carry their boats on their shoulders over the strips of land that separate the water routes' [Fig. 12, next page] (*Historia* 20:2 my transl.). Both among the Sámi and the local peasant population of north Sweden, there is much evidence that travelling in areas without roads meant journeys with light boats over communication networks that included combined water and land transport. The analogies with ethnographically and historically known ways of travelling in this area shed light on the



After Olaus Magnus 1576/1555.

Fig. 12. Russians carrying their boats to the market in Torneå.

probable solutions in prehistoric and medieval times in central Sweden. Like the Swedes in the Iron Age, the Russians and Karelians in the 16th century used *light, portable boats* as the necessary prerequisite for this widespread trade along the northern river systems.

Trade and traded goods

In the earliest phase, trade dominated the relations between Scandinavia, the Orient and the areas around the Silk Routes. The exported goods seem to have been light; primarily furs, but also, honey, wax, amber and slaves were products that were appreciated in the East. They returned with silk and other textiles, colour pigments, silver coins, slaves, and exotics such as spices. The Arabic sources provide contemporary information about the trade of Rus with the Caliphate and the central areas around the Silk Route. The earliest source is the Arab writer Ibn Khordadbeh, who was a director of Posts and Intelligence in the Baghdad Caliphate. In the book *Kitab al masalik wa 'l-mamalik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms), which probably was written in the 840s, he gives information on Rus:

...a tribe from among the as-Saqaliba. They bring furs of beavers and of black foxes and swords from the most distant parts of the Saqaliba [land] to the sea of Rum, [where] the ruler of ar-Rum levies tithes on them. If they want, they travel on the Itil, the river of the as-Saqaliba and pass through Khamlij, town of the Khazars, [where] the ruler of it levies tithes on them. Then they arrive to the Sea of Gurjan and they land on the shore of it which they choose. On occasion they bring merchandise on camels from Gurjan to Baghdad [where] as-Saqaliba eunuchs serve them as interpreters. They claim to be Christians and pay [only] head tax. [transl. by Boba 1967, p. 27].

What is important to note here is that he also says they do not travel on land on their way to the Caspian Sea, but instead "they travel on the Itil, the river of the as-Saqaliba." Furs and swords were light wares that were possible to transport on the small and light boats that were necessary for these journeys. The squirrels are of major importance; they were used as money of a fixed value. Furs were attractive to the Caliphate and were a much appreciated and highly valued commodity from the North already in the Early Iron Age in the Mediterranean, where Roman authors also speak of the black foxes.

As is also clear from this quotation, the first known journeys by Scandinavians to the Muslim states surrounding the Caspian Sea were *peaceful trading expeditions*. Ibn Khordadbeh says that these journeys were *waterborne*, that Scandinavians were arriving to the Black Sea from the distant parts of the Saqaliba, and then travelling on the Don and through the Khazar Empire further to the Caspian Sea. Here they landed on any shore, and sometimes they also left their ships and travelled on camels to Baghdad to sell swords as well as furs from beaver and black fox. The Swedish merchants continued their journeys east of the Caspian Sea as well, to the areas rich in silver, valuable pigments and spices. Whether they used boats part of the distance or changed to camels, is not known.

Annika Larsson (2005) has recently shown that the areas of origin for the silk found in Birka must be between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and further eastwards along the Silk Route. Earlier the kaftan of Byzantium was seen as the source of influence for the kaftan finds in Birka (Hägg 1974). But as Larsson has shown, the use of the kaftan in Constantinople instead was introduced in connection with the medieval cultural and religious changes caused by the Ottoman conquests; the change in dress namely marked the religious change from Christianity to Islam and the demand that the arms should be covered. Instead of being typical of Byzantium, the kaftan in the Late Iron Age is, according to Larsson, characteristic of nomadic riding peoples as well as of the Persian clothing in the Islamic Caliphate. Another important observation by Larsson is that the trade agreement with Constantinople, which included a limited amount of silk, dates to the late 10th century when



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Fig. 13. Silver dirhams displayed in the Birka Museum.

Birka ceased to exist. Larsson argues that the silk earlier arrived by the northern Silk Route (that is, via the Caspian from the Middle East and Central Asia) and not from Byzantium. The precious silk was easily transported on the light vessels of the type we find in the boat burials and did not need to be transported in heavier cargo-ships.

Furs were one of the most important trade goods from Scandinavia eastwards. Furs as merchants' goods are mentioned in the runic inscription G 207, which commemorates a person who *sunarla sat miþ skinum*, "in the south sat with skins," i.e., traded furs. In Sigvatr's *lausavisa* there are *feldar*, "sheepskins," trade goods from Iceland to Norway (Sigvatr XIII 4).

The coin evidence concerning eastern trade

The Islamic coins on Swedish soil are the most concrete remains of the contacts with the areas around the Silk Route. More than 80,000 coins have been found from ca. CE 700 to ca. 1013 with the majority minted in the 9th and beginning of the 10th century [Fig. 13]. In the beginning the coins are ones minted in the south, in the areas around Baghdad, but later the eastern parts of the Caliphate come to be the dominant source. The majority are silver coins. The finds follow the water communication routes through



Fig. 14. Part of the Spillings hoard, which includes coins and much other silver. Display in the Gotlands Museum.

Eastern Europe. Important studies on Islamic coins as evidence for trade and the development of relations between the Caliphate and Europe have been done by Thomas Noonan and Roman Kovalev (Noonan 1984; Kovalev 2001, 2003, 2007). In recent years many additional hoards have been discovered and analysis has started which will shed new light on these relations.

The coins document the trade connections with the Caucasus. The only one which received attention in the discussion about evidence concerning Ingvar's journey was the Swedish find of a Georgian coin printed for David Kuropalates (r. 990–1001) (M. G. Larsson 1983, p. 103). However, there are several other places in the Caucasus under control of the Caliphate which minted coins (von Zambaur 1968; Sears 2004). The Swedish expert on Islamic coins, Gert Rispling, has analysed thousands of Swedish finds of Islamic coins, among which he has also found Khazar copies of Islamic coins (Rispling 2004). His present work is to analyze the big hoard from the Spillings farm on Gotland found in 1999, which with 14,000 coins constitutes the biggest Viking Age silver treasure hoard in the world [Fig. 14]. Most are Islamic and several are Khazar copies [Figs. 15a, b]. In connection with



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Fig. 15 a) Khazar imitations of Islamic dirhams. b) The "Moses coin," ca. 837/8 CE, on which the name of Moses replaces that of Muhammad. The Khazar elite adopted Judaism in the 9th century.

Fig. 16. Islamic dirhams minted at Arminiya (Armenia), from the Spillings hoard.

our project he has surveyed the known coin finds in Sweden of Caucasian origin (unpublished manuscript). He has determined that 11 Islamic coins found in Sweden were minted in "Tiflis," which for four centuries was under Islamic rule. The biggest share of Islamic coins minted in the Caucasus and found on Swedish soil (377 examples) is from "Arminiya" (Armenia) [Fig. 16], but none are known from the other Armenian mint at "Dabil" (today Dvin).

In Rispling's survey there are also places that may be related to the 10th-century raids. 70 of the Swedish finds are from "Arran" (Partaw, present-day Azerbaijan), 31 from Bardha'a (Partaw), but none from the third Azerbaijani mint, "Janza" (today Ganja). A single coin comes from "al-Bab" (Derbend, Russia). A number of other Swedish finds of Oriental coins come from adjoining regions that can be connected with the journeys of the Rus: In Iran, the mint at "Adharbayjan" (Ardabil) produced 13 of the coins, "Ardabil" 4, "Urmiyya" (Urumia) 2. None, however, came from "al-Maragha." 12 of the finds are from "Ma'din Bajunays" in eastern Turkey.

The pair of birds associated with oriental art is also found on the so-called Birka/Hedeby coins



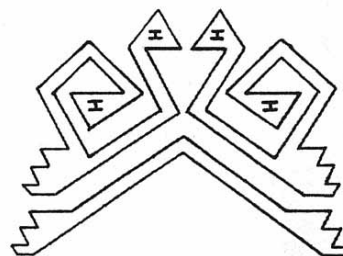
After Malmgren 1966.

Fig. 17. Coin found in Birka with the pair of birds.



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from the 9th century [Fig. 17] (Malmgren 1966). The provenance of these coins has provoked much discussion, with the focus to date always being on their European connections. The motifs on the reverse of some of the coins include a man, a house, two cocks, and two different deer, the second resembling a backward-looking horse. While Malmgren has shown that the face with rays and the deer image may have been borrowed from the Frisian area of northern Europe, no attention has been given to possible eastern origins for some of the imagery. The majority of the coins found in Swedish soil during the Birka/Hedeby period were struck in the Caliphate, often in the former Persian provinces east of the Caspian Sea. There the cock was a special and frequently used motif on the silk textiles and on carpets attested by more modern examples [Fig. 18]; likewise the deer is a common motif on textiles (Porada 1962). Indeed the birds on the coins clearly are cocks, and the coins depicting them have on their other side a ship of central Swedish type, with a small sail that is raised on top of the yard, a feature that boat constructors and sailors connect with river traffic to catch the wind high above the shore of the river. Experiments have shown that



After Özkahraman 2005.

Fig. 18. Pair of birds, one of the most common motifs on kilims in Anatolia and the Caucasus.

the low and light ships of central Sweden cannot take larger sails.¹ Such were the kind of ships which my analysis has shown were probably used by the Svear of central Sweden to control communication and trade eastward in the Birka period (G. Larsson 2007).

Silk, textiles and clothes

Textiles are an important source of information about contacts with the East. Silk from China, Sogdiana and also the Caucasus appear in Swedish Viking-age burials. We have earlier discussed the results by Annika Larsson (2005), who argues for the Eastern origin of those silks rather than a Byzantine provenance.

During the last decade many other textiles have been ¹⁴C analysed, and several have turned out to be of Viking-age date (Nockert and Possnert 2002). In the earliest phase, from the 9th to the 12th century, ships occur as important motifs. Often the composition of motifs and ornament are similar to those on coins and carved picture stones. In techniques and motifs they show strong influences from some areas around the Silk Route, especially the Caucasus region and the Caliphate,

The Kyrkås tapestry, used as an antependium in Kyrkås old church in Jämtland and recently ¹⁴C dated to CE 990–1160, shows a ship and other images within octagons and in a strongly geometrical pattern [Fig. 19]. The ship resembles the Norwegian Viking ships. The choice of motifs in the octagons here — the pair of birds and the backward-looking animal — is also found on

Fig. 19. Detail of ship motif in the tapestry from the Kyrkås Church in Jämtland.



After Nockert and Possnert 2002.

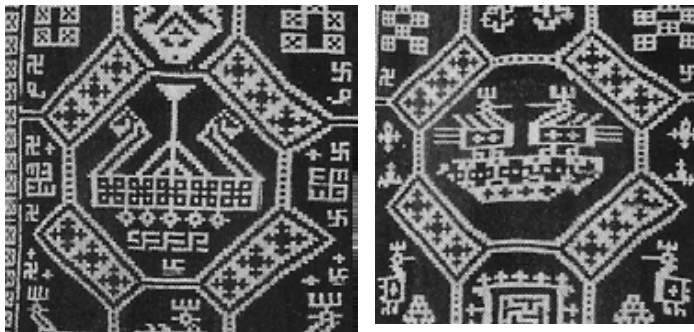


Photo copyright © 2011 Daniel C. Waugh

Fig. 20. A picture stone, dating from the 8th–9th centuries showing a valkyre, a rider in “Oriental dress” and a ship. Found at Broa, Halla sn., Island of Gotland; now in the Gotlands Museum.

the Birka coins. These motifs are influences from Islamic art, as also are the single big bird, the tree, and the geometrical pattern. The octagons and these kinds of geometrical patterns are still used in traditional textile art in the Caucasus and in Anatolia among the the Kurds. The equal-armed crosses and the crossed crosses that fill the frames are Orthodox, representing influences from the Eastern church.

While most of the elements in the patterns are the result of influences from the long-distance journeys, the ship is the Nordic addition to the variety of images displayed on the textile. It was probably made when the ship still had a central ideological meaning and value, i.e., in the late 10th or beginning of the 11th century. As we know from the picture stones, by the late 11th century the ship had lost its role as a central motif (Franzén and Nockert 1992, pp. 66ff; Nockert and Possnert 2002, Nordic Museum nr. 10038). [Fig. 20]

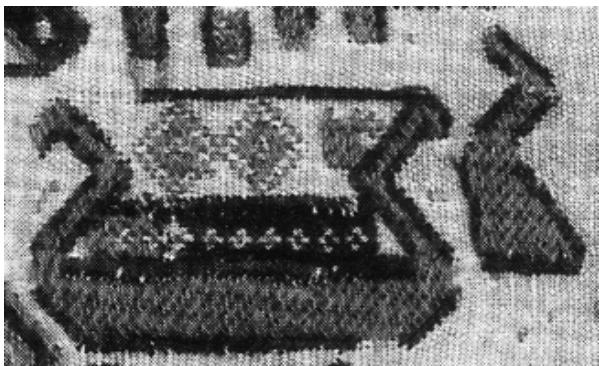


Figs. 21a, b. Details of the design on the tapestry found in the Överhogdals Church in Jämtland, fragment IV.

One of five pieces (fragment IV) comprising the tapestry found in a building beside Överhogdals Church in Jämtland has a similar pattern to that on the Kyrkås tapestry. Dated between CE 900 and 1100, it has octagonal fields with a decoration of geometrical ornaments such as crossed crosses, ships, and birds [Figs. 21 a, b] (Nockert and Possnert 2002, p. 77). The Överhogdal tapestries include two in *soumak* technique (Ia and Ib), which fall within the same date range or

Fig. 22 (top). Pair of birds on an Anatolian carpet from the Marby Church.

Fig. 23 (bottom). The ship and a female figure on Överhogdal fragment 1a.



After Nockert and Possnert 2002.



After Nockert and Possnert 2002.

Fig. 24. The ship depicted on Överhogdal fragment III.

suggest it is of later date, has no ship and thus probably dates to the period when ship imagery was no longer used.

In these Swedish Viking-age textile finds, both techniques and motifs seem to reveal influences from certain areas around the Silk Route. The *soumak* technique and motifs including octagons, the pair of birds and the different types of geometrical and other patterns, which are seen on the Swedish Viking-age textiles, are all found in the area of the kilim carpets around the Caspian and Black Seas and especially in the Caucasus. On the kilims of Dagestan (Ramsey 1996, p. 78) there is also a ship-like motif [Fig. 25] that greatly resembles the Scandinavian ships with curved stems and animal- or bird-like stem decorations. Some symbols resemble cut-out stems, that *pars pro toto* may represent whole ships [Fig. 26].



Fig. 25 (left). Ship motifs on flatweave in Dagestan, NE Caucasus.

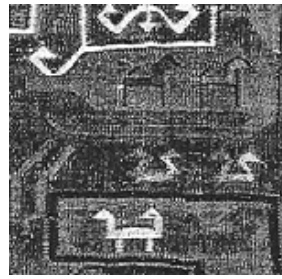


Fig. 26 (right). Ship stems (?) on flatweave in Dagestan.

After Ramsey 1996, p. 78, fig. 4

In the few regional depictions within Sasanian art east of the Caspian Sea, the ships differ from these. Especially interesting on these flatweaves from Dagestan is the shape of the ship's hull. It is often box-shaped, as on the Birka/Hedeby coins. Here, the character of the river systems requires light ships to be used, which means that these ships must have a completely different hull than the cog, which is commonly associated with the box-like hull shape. On the Dagestan kilims, the dragon motif is also central in more or less stylised form (Ramsey 1996) and often appears as a dragon-snake. This is well known from Scandinavian Viking-age art. It has been assumed that this motif was introduced in the Caucasus with Mongol expansion in the 13th century and originated in China, but Western sources have shown that it appears earlier (Ramsey 1996). The similarity in ship types may indicate early contacts between Scandinavia and the Caucasus.

The obvious parallels between the ship types and other motifs on the earliest Swedish textiles from Överhogdal, and the ship types and symbolic language in the Caucasus and the Orient, must be seen in relation to the journeys to these areas in the 8th – 10th centuries. The intense commercial contacts have resulted in an exchange of ideas as well as cultural influences in both directions. As was observed on a research expedition in Khevsureti in 2009, not only the motifs but also the textile techniques used are the same. Where the Birka fragments, as Annika Larsson has shown, point to their origin in the East, not Byzantium, as others had assumed (A. Larsson 2007; cf. Hägg 1974), the increasing

contacts with the latter starting in the late 10th century are reflected in the mixture of Islamic and Byzantine influences seen on the later Kyrkås tapestry. Foreign material found in Sigtuna from the early 11th century (the probable date of the Kyrkås tapestry) shows that cultural impulses from Byzantium had to a large extent replaced the earlier Oriental influences that were strong in the Birka material. This is visible, for instance, in recently published analyses of glass from Sigtuna, where the Byzantine influences are strong from the 11th to the 14th century (Henricson 2006). This reflects the change in the communication pattern and seafaring, which corresponds to the transition in the late 10th century between the periods that Jansson has identified as the "older phase" and the "younger phase" (2005, p. 39).

Contacts with the Khazar empire

In the 9th and 10th century an important route between Scandinavia and the Orient passed through the Khazar empire where it joined what constituted a northern branch of the Silk Route. Located north of the Caucasus, the Khazars since the 7th century had a flourishing multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire reaching from the Don in the west, to the lower Volga, and to the steppes in the east. The Rus came on ships along the Don and through the Khazar empire (via channel or portage) to the Volga, or from the north on the Volga to the Caspian Sea, and they needed good relations with the Khazars. As cited earlier, the Arab geographer Ibn Khordadbeh tells how Scandinavian merchants already in the 840s were travelling from the Don to the Caspian Sea, and thus through the Khazar realm on their way to Baghdad for trade. The Rus merchants are described by Ibn Khordadbeh as "a kind of *saqaliba*." He calls the Don "the *Saqaliba* River." The 12th-century Arab geographer al-Idrisi knew the Don as the *nahr al-Rusiya*.

The relations with the Khazars were peaceful at first, and the Rus were present in their country as traders. Al-Masudi knows them as a numerous nation with many subdivisions, who "for trading purposes constantly visit the countries of Andalus, Rome, Constantinople and Khazar...." (§ 8 after transl. by Minorsky 1958, annex III). He also describes the multi-ethnic people of the

Khazar empire, and says that in Atil (Itil), where the Khazar king resided, there were Muslims, Christians, Jews and pagans. The latter included Rus, one of the groups residing in the town who had a special part of the town that was situated on one side of it together with the Saqaliba (Slavs)" (Al Masudi § 4, Ibid.). Al-Masudi also notes that here, like in Byzantium, "The Rus and Saqaliba ... serve in the king's army and are his servants..." (Ibid., p.147).

From trade to raids

In the late 9th century the character of the voyages to the Caspian Sea and surrounding areas seems to change dramatically. As in their relations with the Byzantine Empire, the Rus raids spread and they came in ships. The earliest Muslim report on the devastation by Rus on the Caspian coast is recorded during the reign of 'Alid Hasan b. Zayd (864–884). According to Ibn Isfandiyar, the Rus on this occasion went to attack Abaskun in Tabaristan by the southeast shore of the Caspian Sea, a Muslim area. This time the Khazar ruler stopped them, and his troops killed all of them (Minorsky 1958, p.111).

In 909, says Ibn Isfandiyar, the Rus arrived by sea with 16 ships, raided the same coast and launched another attack on Abaskun, with plundering and murder. The commander of the area was, as earlier, quick to launch a counterattack on the Rus one night. The Rus were taken by surprise, many were killed, and several were taken away as slaves. In ca. 910 the Sari and Gilan coasts in the southwestern Caspian Sea became the target of Rus maritime expeditions (M. G. Larsson 1997, pp. 25–26). They were said to have come "in great numbers" and raided the Sari, but in Gilan the Khazar ruler attacked them at night when they had pulled their boats ashore. He had all the Rus ships set on fire, and killed everyone that was on the shore. Only the more cautious participants who had spent the night at sea survived. This may or may not be the same expedition that al-Masudi has described in great detail and of which he has forgotten the date, though he says it was "after 300" (AH), i.e., after CE 912.

The largest attack on the shores of the Caspian Sea was in AH 300/CE 912. Here al-Masudi has a detailed description of both the route and the

events. The Rus came with a large fleet of 500 ships from the Black Sea, entered the Sea of Azov, and were stopped by the Khazars, probably at the fortified town of Sarkel part way up the Don. After negotiating with the Khazar emperor they got free passage through his country to the Volga and the Caspian Sea; in return the Rus had to share the booty from the raids with the emperor. Al-Masudi writes:

The ships of the Rus scattered over the sea and carried out raids in Gilan, Tabaristan, Abaskun (which stand on the coast of Jurjan), the oil-bearing areas and (the lands lying) in the direction of Azarbaijan, for from this territory of Ardabil in Azarbaijan to this sea there is a three days' distance. The Rus shed blood, captured women and children and seized the property (of the people). They sent out raiding parties and burnt (villages). The nations around the sea were in an uproar, because in olden times they had not witnessed any enemy marching on them from the sea, as only boats of merchants and fishermen had been plying on it. The Rus fought with the Gil and Daylam and with one of the generals of Ibn al-Saj. Then they came to the oil-bearing coast of the kingdom of Sharvan known as Bakuh (Baku)... [Al-Masudi § 8 transl. by Minorsky 1958 annex III]

The inhabitants around the Caspian Sea were taken by surprise by this sea-borne enemy. Initially, they were powerless to resist, but on their return, despite the prior arrangement the Rus had with the Khazar ruler, "laden with booty" they were attacked by the local Muslim population and many of them slaughtered. Writing in 943 CE, al-Masudi noted that, after the defeat in 912, the Rus seemed to have been pacified (al-Masudi § 8, transl. by Minorsky 1958, annex III). Yet, in the same year, another naval expedition from Rus entered the Caspian Sea.

The Persian philosopher Ibn Miskawayh (932–1030) tells that, in 943 or 944, a fleet from the people called Rus came sailing on the Caspian Sea toward Azerbaijan (Ibn Miskawayh 1920–21, II, 62–67). He cites an eyewitness report of the events. From the Caspian Sea the Rus sailed up the Kura River to the province of Arran and then continued up the side River Terter to the town of Berda, where the town's governor and an army of more than 5,000 men met them. They made the mistake of thinking that the

Rus were like Byzantine people or Armenians. Many volunteers had joined to fight the holy war against the intruders, but the Rus made a sudden attack and killed or drove away all but 300; these were killed except for those mounted on horses. The Rus seized the town. In the beginning the inhabitants were treated well. When the Muslims attacked and threw stones at the backs of the Rus, the latter lost patience and gave them three days to leave town. When many refused to go, the Rus used their swords on them and took many as prisoners. Men were gathered in a mosque, women and children in the fortress, and all were given the chance to buy their freedom. Those men who did not were killed, and women and youngsters were turned into sex slaves. The ruler in Azerbaijan, al-Marzuban Ibn Muhammed, tried to attack them with 30,000 men, but he and his troops were continually defeated. Then Allah heard his prayers. The Scandinavians were struck by a disease. When they were decimated, they were ambushed, and more than 700 killed. In the city the disease hit them hard, and finally one night they gave up, fled to their ships with women and jewellery, and sailed away.

The threat from the Rus became an increasing source of worry for the Khazars. In 960, the Khazar king Josef expressed his concern in a letter to Hasday Ibn Shaprut, an eminent official of the caliph of Cordoba:

Know and understand that I live by the mouth of the river. By the help of the Almighty I guard the mouth of the river and do not prevent the Rus, who come in their ships, to come out on the Caspian Sea to go against the Arabs, and not either any enemy on land towards Bab al-Abwab. I fight them. If I would let them for an hour (to sail down to the Caspian Sea), they should raid the whole Arab country all the way down to Baghdad... [After Arbman 1955, p. 61, my transl.]

The concern of the Khazar king was justified. Within a few years, the attack he feared came. In 965, the Rus prince Sviatoslav launched a devastating expedition. He took the fortress Belaia Vezha ("white city"), probably Sarkel on the Don (Minorsky 1958, p. 115). The route to the Khazar realm and the Caspian Sea lay open. Ibn Hawqal tells how the Rus thoroughly destroyed the Khazar towns of Atil, Samandar

and Khazaran. In Samandar there had been 40,000 vineyards. When speaking with a man in Djordan, who had recently returned from there, the man said that "there was nothing left even for charity to the poor in any vineyard or garden, if it even is a leaf left on a branch. Because the Rus came, and not one cluster, not a single grape remained..." (my transl. after Arbman 1955, p. 62). The people who lived there — who were Muslims, of other faiths, or heathens — all emigrated. This event marked the beginning of the fall of the Khazar empire.

In his studies of Caucasian history, Vladimir Minorsky (1953, 1958) provides several examples of subsequent Rus actions in the area. In the area around al-Bab (Derbend), the ruling amir Maymun sought help from Rus against his rivals. The Rus arrived in 987 in 18 ships, but when the crew of one ship went to town they were attacked by inhabitants and all were killed. The other ships then proceeded to Sharvan and Mukan and *nahr al-atiq*, "the old river." It seems that here they entered the same region as in 943–44, but *nahr al-atiq*, "the old river," could either mean one of the two estuaries of the lower Kura or, as Minorsky argues, the river Kuhan-rud ("the Old River") further south in Persian Talish.

The most important source used by Minorsky, the *Ta'rikh al-bab* (dating from the 4th/11th century), suggests that the amir Maymun was apparently relying heavily on the Rus despite the events of 987. He had several of them around him as *ghulams*, which Minorsky interprets as a kind of *druzhina* / "comitatus" (1958, p. 114). In 989 the history relates how a fanatical preacher arrived from Gilan and demanded that he surrender his Russian ghulams so that they could be either converted or killed. Naturally, this may have been spurred by the memory of their earlier attacks on the Gilan coasts and a fear that the Rus would use al-Bab as a harbour for further raids along the coasts.

In the year 1030 the Rus arrived once again to the Caspian Sea, now with 38 ships. The *Ta'rikh al-bab* describes how they arrived in Sharvan again, where the shah met them near Bakuya (Baku). On this occasion most of the Sharvanians were killed, and the Rus could continue up the river Kurr (Kura). The shah Minuchihr tried to

close the al-Rass (Araxes) in order to stop their progress, but instead they drowned many of the Muslims. The Rus were not eager to leave their boats, but it is told that later the lord of Janza (the town Ganja by the Kura) made them disembark and gave them money to assist him for his own purposes. He took them to Baylaqan, north of the Araxes, whose inhabitants had revolted against him, and with their help he captured the town and seized and killed his brother Askariya. The Rus then left Arran for Rum, the western parts of the Caucasus that were controlled by the Byzantines, and continued to their own country (*Ta'rikh al-bab* §15, after Minorsky 1958, pp. 31ff).

Thus, in 432/1032 the Rus returned for more raids, encouraged by the earlier victories. They ravaged and plundered the territories of Sharvan and took many captives. In response, the amir Mansur of al-Bab (Derbend), together with other Islamic leaders, led a great expedition against the Rus. When the Rus returned loaded with booty and captives, most of them were put to the sword. Allied with Alans, the Rus returned to the area for revenge in 1033, but were beaten back by the combined military effort of the different local groups (*Ta'rikh al-bab* §38, after Minorsky 1958, pp. 45–47).

The *Ta'rikh al-bab*, which is usually informative about important foreign visits, has no information on Rus having entered the region during Ingvar's expedition. This silence has led to scepticism as to whether that expedition really reached the Caspian Sea. Conceivably, the local residents, on their guard from previous raids, would have blocked their passage. However, we can be quite confident that the route taken by Ingvar the Far-Traveller through Caucasus followed the ancient trade route mentioned already by Pliny and Tacitus and was one familiar to earlier generations of Scandinavians as a branch of the so-called "Silk Route." From time to time, in periods when the other branches of the "Silk Route" were blocked for political, economical or military reasons, this became one of the most important trade routes between East and West, between Europe and Asia. Ingvar's journey will be discussed in a forthcoming article in the journal.

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Notes

1. A too-large sail on the replica Embla, of the type used in northern Norway on the fishing boats of the Atlantic Ocean (the Nordland boats), was borrowed and used in 1997 for this smaller boat (based on Prästgården 3, Gamla Uppsala) in Foteviken, Scania. In the hard wind the boat capsized and filled with water.

2. According to Nockert, fragments Ia and Ib were woven on the same warp but by different weavers, perhaps a mother and daughter (Nockert and Possnert 2002, p. 69). What is probably the older tapestry has a ¹⁴C cal. date between CE 656 and 852, 1 σ (Ua-1942), while Ia has two dates: ¹⁴C cal. 772–950, 1 σ (Ua-1940), and 965–1170, 1 σ (Ua-1941).

The Weaving Art Museum and Research Institute defines "soumak technique" as follows: "[It] produces a patterned weaving with a flat surface of discontinuous horizontal threads known as weft. The variously colored weft threads are wrapped around the warp threads, the primary structural component. In kelims, they are passed over and under adjacent warps. But unlike kelim weaving there are no slits at each color join and there is a supplementary weft thread which, along with the pattern weft, provides the second component necessary to create a structurally sound woven object" (<http://www.weavingartmuseum.org/ex2_main.htm>, accessed October 4, 2011).

3. Fragment III has been ¹⁴C dated to CE 900–1160 1 σ (Ua-1944). It is interesting to note that, the "later" imagery notwithstanding, Fragment V has an early ¹⁴C date, cal. CE 794–963, 1 σ (Ua-1943).