

Ibn Fadlān

AN EXCERPT FROM THE RISĀLA, DESCRIBING THE FUNERARY CUSTOMS OF
SWEDISH VIKINGS ON THE VOLGA (A.D. 921-2)

tr. H. M. Smyser
Original in Arabic

In 921, Ibn Fadlān set out as secretary of an embassy from the Calif of Bagdad to the king of the Bulgars of the Middle Volga,, a Turkish people with a remote and more or less nominal relationship to the Bulgars of the Balkans. Of this mission he wrote an account, called a Risāla, in which he described, among the various peoples with whom the embassy came into contact, a tribe of Swedish Rus Vikings, or, more accurately, Rus armed merchants, and among the events of the expedition the witnessing of a funeral which these Rus accorded one of their chief men, a cremation within a ship, preceded by ceremonies nowhere else described nor inferrable from any literary allusions or grave finds.]

I had heard that at the deaths of their chief personages they did many things, of which the least was cremation, and I was interested to learn more. At last I was told of the death of one of their outstanding men. They placed him in a grave and put a roof over it for ten days while they cut and sewed garments for him.

If the deceased is a poor man they make a little boat, which they lay him in and burn. If he is rich, they collect his goods and divide them into three parts, one for his family, another to pay for his clothing, and a third for making *nabīd*, which they drink until the day when his female slave will kill herself and be burned with her master. They stupify themselves by drinking this *nabīd* night and day; sometimes one of them dies cup in hand.

When a great personage dies, the people of his family ask his young women and men slaves,) "Who among you will die with him?" One answers, "I." Once he or she has said that, the thing is obligatory; there is no backing out of it. Usually it is the girl slaves who do this [i.e., volunteer].

When the man of whom I have spoken died, his girl slaves were asked, "Who will die with him?" One answered, "I." She was then put in the care of two young women, who watched over her and accompanied her everywhere, to the point that they occasionally washed her feet with their own hands. Garments were being made for the deceased and all else was being readied of which he had need. Meanwhile the slave drinks every day and sings, giving herself over to pleasure.

When the day arrived on which the man was to be cremated and the girl with him, I went to the river on which was his ship. I saw that they had drawn the ship onto the shore, that they had erected four posts of birch wood and other wood, and that around it [the ship] was made a structure like great ships'-tents out of wood. Then they pulled the ship up until it was on this wooden construction. Then they began to come and go and to speak words which I did not understand, while the man was still in his grave and had not yet been brought out. Then they brought a couch and put it on the

ship and covered it with a mattress of Greek brocade. Then came an old woman whom they call the Angel of Death, and she spread upon the couch the furnishings mentioned. It is she who has charge of the clothes-making and arranging all things, and it is she who kills the girl slave. I saw that she was a strapping old woman, fat and louring.

When they came to the grave they removed the earth from above the wood, then the wood, and took out the dead man clad in the garments in which he had died. I saw that he had grown black from the cold of the country. They had put *nabīd*, fruit, and a pandora in the grave with him. They removed all that. The dead man did not smell bad and only his color had changed. They dressed him in trousers, stockings (?), boots, a tunic [qurtaq], and caftan of brocade with gold buttons. They put a hat of brocade and fur on him. Then they carried him into the pavilion [qubba] on the ship. They seated him on the mattress and propped him up with cushions. They brought *nabīd*, fruits, and fragrant plants which they put with him, then bread-, meat, and onions, which they placed before him. Then they brought a dog, which they cut in two and put in the ship. Then they brought his weapons and placed them by his side. Then they took two horses, ran them until they sweated, then cut them to pieces with a sword and put them into the ship. They took two cows, which they likewise cut to pieces and put in the ship. Next they killed a rooster and a hen and threw them in. The girl slave who wishes to be killed went here and there and into each of their tents, and the master of each tent had sexual intercourse with her and said, "Tell your lord I have done this out of love for him."

Friday afternoon they led the slave girl to a thing that they had made which resembled a door frame. She placed her feet on the palms of the men and they raised her up to overlook this frame. She spoke some words and they lowered her again. A second time they raised her up and she did again what she had done; then they lowered her. They raised her a third time and she did as she had done the two times before. Then they brought her a hen; she cut off the head, which she threw away, and then they took the hen and put it in the ship. I asked the interpreter what she had done. He answered, "The first time they raised her she said, 'Behold, I see my father and mother.' The second time she said, 'I see all my dead relatives seated.' The third time she said, 'I see my master seated in Paradise and Paradise is beautiful and green; with him are men and boy servants. He calls me. Take me to him. Now they took her to the ship. She took off the two bracelets which she was wearing and gave them to the two girls who served her and were the daughters of the woman called the Angel of Death. Then they raised her onto the ship but they did not make her enter into the pavilion.

Then men came with shields and sticks. She was given a cup of *nabīd*; she sang at taking it and drank. The interpreter told me that she in this fashion bade farewell to all her girl companions. Then she was given another cup; she took it and sang for a long time while the old woman incited her to drink up and go into the pavilion where her master lay. I saw that she was distracted; she wanted to enter the pavilion but put her head between it and the boat. Then the old woman seized her head and made her enter the pavilion and entered with her. Thereupon the men began to strike with the sticks on the shields so that her cries could not be heard and the other slave girls would not be frightened and seek to escape death with their masters. Then six men went into the

pavilion and each had intercourse with the girl. Then they laid her at the side of her master; two held her feet and two her hands; the old women known as the Angel of Death re-entered and looped a cord around her neck and gave the crossed ends to the two men for them to pull. Then she approached her with a broad-bladed dagger, which she plunged between her ribs repeatedly, and the men strangled her with the cord until she was dead.

Then the closest relative of the dead man, after they had placed the girl whom they have killed beside her master, came, took a piece of wood which he lighted at a fire, and walked backwards with the back of his head toward the boat and his face turned (toward the people), with one hand holding the kindled stick and the other covering his anus, being completely naked, for the purpose of setting fire to the wood that had been made ready beneath the ship. Then the people came up with tinder and other fire wood, each holding a piece of wood of which he had set fire to an end and which he put into the pile of wood beneath the ship. Thereupon the flames engulfed the wood, then the ship, the pavilion, the man, the girl, and everything in the ship. A powerful, fearful wind began to blow so that the flames became fiercer and more intense.

One of the Rus was at my side and I heard him speak to the interpreter, who was present. I asked the interpreter what he said. He answered, "He said, 'You Arabs are fools.'" "Why?" I asked him. He said, "You take the people who are most dear to you and whom you honor most and you put them in the ground where insects and worms devour them. We burn him in a moment, so that he enters Paradise at once." Then he began to laugh uproariously. When I asked him why he laughed, he said, "His lord, for love of him, has sent the wind to bring him away in an hour." And actually an hour had not passed before the ship, the wood, the girl, and her master were nothing but cinders and ashes.

Then they constructed in the place where had been the ship which they had drawn up out of the river something like a small round hill, in the middle of which they erected a great post of birch wood, on which they wrote the name of the man and the name of the Rus king and they departed.