Introduction

On Thursday, the twelfth of Safar, 309 [June 21, 921], a band of intrepid travelers left Baghdad, the City of Peace. Their destination was the confluence of the upper Volga and the Kama, the realm of the king of the Volga Bulghārs. They arrived at the court of the king on Sunday, the twelfth of Muharram, 310 [May 12, 922]. They had been on the road for 325 days and had covered a distance of about 3,000 miles (4,800 km). They must have managed to travel on average about ten miles a day.

The way there was far from easy. The province of Khurasan was in military turmoil. There were many local potentates, such as the Samanid governor of Khwārazm, who were often lukewarm in their support for the caliphate in Baghdad: our travelers had to secure their permission to continue. The Turkish tribes who lived on the Ustyurt plateau, on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, were mostly tolerant of Muslim merchants, but they were proudly independent and suspicious of outside interference. The Khazars, who controlled the delta where the Volga flowed into the Caspian, had always defied Muslim control. And there was the terrain and the weather: deserts, mountains, rivers, snows, and bitter cold.

Why would someone want to make such a journey in the early fourth/tenth century, from the luxurious splendor of caliphal Baghdad to a billet in a yurt among the Bulghārs, a semi-nomadic Turkic tribe?

Some months before the travelers left, a missive had reached the court of Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–32). The king of the
Volga Bulghārs had embraced Islam. He was asking to be accepted as one of the caliph’s loyal emirs—the caliph’s name would be proclaimed as part of Friday prayers in Bulghār territory. The king petitioned the caliph to send him instruction in law and in how he and his people were to correctly perform religious devotions as proper Muslims. He also asked that the caliph bestow enough funds on him to enable him to construct a fort and thus protect himself against his enemies.

The petition was granted, and arrangements were made to meet the king’s request. A diplomatic mission was assembled to visit the king and formally recognize him and his people as members of the Islamic community.

We know about the events and its actors from a remarkable book by Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, a member of the mission. Yet all of the members of the diplomatic mission remain shrouded in obscurity, especially the book’s author.

Sadly our other extant sources make no mention of this adventure. We rely exclusively on the information provided in the book to enable us to reconstruct the composition of the embassy. The only other early source that mentions any of the characters involved is an annalistic chronicle known as Experiences of Nations, Consequences of Ambition (Tājārib al-umam wa-‘awāqib al-himam), by the civil servant, philosopher, and historian Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), and, even then, not in the context of the embassy but of the affairs of the reign of al-Muqtadir.

**Dramatis Personae**

It is difficult to work out from Ibn Faḍlān’s book who took part in the mission and who played what part.

1. The Representative: Nadhīr al-Ḥaramī. The man placed in charge of the embassy, who did not actually travel, was the official assigned to recruit the personnel and finance the mission. He seems to have enjoyed al-Muqtadir’s confidence,
and it is likely, from his name “al-Ḥaramī,” that he was a eunuch who guarded the harem. In addition to organizing the embassy, he entrusted it with (at least) two letters: one was addressed to Atrak ibn al-Qaṭaghān, the field marshal of the Ghuzziyyah (Oghuz Turks), along with several gifts; the other was addressed to the king of the Bulghārs. It is clear from the account that Nadhīr had been in communication with the field marshal and with the Bulghār king. His relationship with the Ghuzziyyah is based on their host-friend system, described in the text, and the Bulghār king had written to him asking for more medication (this is an otherwise unattested detail that features prominently in some non-Arabic accounts of the Bulghārs’ conversion to Islam).

2. The Envoy: Sawsan al-Rassī. Sawsan is bound to Nadhīr as his freed man. Sawsan’s name “al-Rassī” is obscure but may indicate that he was of Turkic or other Central Asian origin. Sawsan would presumably have been well acquainted with the geopolitics of the region. We discover, when the embassy leaves al-Jurjāniyyah for the Ustyurt, that he is accompanied by a brother-in-law, who is not mentioned elsewhere in the account.

3. The Local Expert: Takīn al-Turkī. Takīn (the name is a Turkic honorific) was well acquainted with and known in the area. The khwārazm-shāh, the Samanid governor of Khwārazm, recognizes him and refers to him as a slave-soldier and notes that he had been involved in the arms trade with the Turks, suspecting that he is the prime mover behind the mission. On the Ustyurt, we meet him chatting with a fellow Turk, and, in the enforced stay in Bulghār, he informs Ibn Faḍlān of the presence there of a giant from the land of Gog and Magog.

4. The Soldier: Bārs al-Ṣaqlābī. Bārs may have been the Samanid commander, the chamberlain of Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad and governor of al-Jurjāniyyah, who defected, in 296/908–9, with a force of some 4,000 Turkish slave-troops from the Samanids
to Baghdad. Ibn Faḍlān’s account provides no substantial information on him.

5. The Financier: A further member of the mission is Aḥmad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārazmī, who is appointed as the agent for the estate from which the mission is to receive its principal funds. Unaccountably, he leaves Baghdad later than the embassy and is easily thwarted in his attempts to reach Bukhara. The mission, therefore, must proceed without the funds the king of the Bulghārs so badly wanted.

6. The vizier Ḥāmid ibn al-ʿAbbās, who otherwise does not feature in our account, has entrusted the mission with a letter for the king.

7. The king is represented by a Khazar: ʿAbdallāh ibn Bāshtū, the Bulghār envoy, was a Muslim of Khazar origin, who may, according to some scholars, have been involved in the dissemination of Islam throughout Volga Bulgharia. The French scholar of Ibn Faḍlān, Marius Canard, thinks he is a political refugee from Khazaria and sees in his ethnic identity a clear indication that Khazar enmity was the occasion of the Bulghār petition.¹ From his actions in Khwārazm, it is clear that ʿAbdallāh’s advice was respected by the mission.

8. The jurists and the instructors. These nameless individuals are an enigma. When the mission is about to set out from al-Jurjāniyyah, we discover that there is only one instructor and one jurist. The jurist and the instructor decide not to continue to Bulghār territory. No reason is given.

9. The retainers or slave-soldiers. It also appears, from the report of the departure from al-Jurjāniyyah, that the mission was accompanied by retainers or slave-soldiers (ghilmān), who likewise do not continue. This is the sole reference to them in the account.

10. The guide. The mission picks up a guide named Falūs, from al-Jurjāniyyah. It is not clear whether this guide also acts as the tarjumān, the interpreter.
11. The interpreter. Ibn Faḍlān mentions “the interpreter” in twelve paragraphs: §§19, 20, 30, 31, 38, 40, 45, 47, 61, 84, 85, 88. It is unclear how many interpreters there are. The king’s interpreter was presumably ʿAbdallāh ibn Bāshtū al-Khazari, whom he sent to Baghdad with his petition, although the text does not say that he fulfilled this function for the king. We also meet Takīn al-Turkī acting in the role of interpreter. Were there more interpreters, one the mission brought along with it as the “guide” from al-Jurjāniyyah and one serving the king of the Bulghārs? The interpreter not only translates on behalf of the embassy but also provides cultural commentary on some of the phenomena and customs observed by Ibn Faḍlān.

12. And so to Ibn Faḍlān, a figure who, like a wandering archetype, turns up in the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected guises. Who was Ibn Faḍlān? As is so often the case, it is easier to begin with who he was not. He was not an Arab merchant, or the leader of the mission, or the secretary of the mission, or a jurist. He was neither the figure inspired by the Arabian Nights, whom Michael Crichton created in his novel The Eaters of the Dead (1976), nor the Hollywood realization played by Antonio Banderas in the movie The Thirteenth Warrior (1999). He was not a Greek resident of Baghdad who had been converted to Islam and held a position of trust at the court of Caliph Muqtadir. In fact, we have only his own words to go by: his role was to ensure that protocol was observed; to read the letters of the caliph, the vizier, and Nadhīr, the representative of the king of the Bulghārs; and to present formally the gifts intended to honor the hosts of the mission. That he was educated is clear from his duties, and the instruction in Islamic law that he delivers to the Muslims of Bulghār would not have been beyond the ken of any reasonably educated Muslim. The king of the Bulghārs treats him as an Arab, though some scholars prefer to see him as a non-Arab Muslim.

Yet Harlan, Coetzee’s Magistrate, and Kipling’s Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Drahot are weak adumbrations of Ibn Faḍlān. Ibn Faḍlān is a voice, or, rather, a series of voices: the voice of reason, when faced with his colleagues’ obduracy; the voice of decorum and dignity, and often of prudery, when confronted by the wilder excesses of Turkic behavior; the voice of shock, when horrified by the Rūs burial rite. Yet he is also the voice of curiosity, when exposed to the myriad of marvels he witnesses; the voice of candor, when he reveals how he is out-argued by the Bulghār king; and the voice of calm observation, as he tries to remain unperturbed so many miles from home, on the fringes of Muslim eschatology, in the realm of Gog and Magog.

There is something quintessentially human about this series of voices. Like all of us, Ibn Faḍlān can be one person and many simultaneously. He is able to entertain contradictions, as we all are. Our sense of his humanity is highlighted by his avoidance of introspection. He is not given to analysis, whether self-analysis or the analysis of others. He strives to record and understand what he has observed. He regularly fails to understand, as we all do, and sometimes, defeated by what he has observed, he indulges his sense of superiority, as we all do. But he is not convincing when he does so. I find Ibn Faḍlān the most honest of authors writing in the classical
Arabic tradition. His humanity and honesty keep this text fresh and alive for each new generation of readers fortunate to share in its treasures.

My earlier comparison with Kipling is instructive in other ways. Like so much of Kipling’s work, for example, the nature of what might loosely be referred to as the imperial experience is at the heart also of Ibn Faḍlān’s account—nowhere more acutely, perhaps, than when he is bested in a basic legal disputation (munāẓarah) by the Bulghār king or when a Bāshghird tribesman notices our author watching him eating a louse and provocatively declares it a delicacy. And just as Kipling’s English mirrors the wit and pace of the table talk enjoyed in the Punjab Club, Ibn Faḍlān’s Arabic may perhaps mirror the conversational idioms of his intended audience (or audiences). There is mystery here though. Ibn Faḍlān’s audience remains as elusive as do he and the members of the mission, for his work disappears completely without a trace until, several centuries later, the geographer and lexicographer Yāqūt quotes it on his visit to Marw and Khwārazm. In Islamic scholarship, for an author to be read was for that author to be reproduced and quoted. There is no indication that Ibn Faḍlān’s work was ever read before Yāqūt!

**Turmoil**

The world Ibn Faḍlān lived in and traveled through was in turmoil. The caliphal court, the treasury, the vizierate, the provinces, Bagh- dad’s population, religious sectarianism—everything was in a state of upheaval. In Ibn Faḍlān’s account we read of the strange surprises and uncustomary peoples he encountered, but he says almost nothing about Baghdad. As Baghdad and the caliphal court provide the religio-political context for the mission, no matter how eastward looking it may be, it is worth visiting Baghdad in the early fourth/tenth century.

Baghdad was the Abbasid capital founded by Caliph al-Manṣūr in 145/762, with its Round City known as the City of Peace (*Madīnat al-Salām*), a Qur’anic echo at its spiritual heart. The Baghdad of the
early fourth/tenth century is the Baghdad of al-Muqtadir’s reign. At the age of thirteen, al-Muqtadir was the youngest of the Abbasids to become caliph, and he remained caliph for some twenty-four years, with two minor interruptions totaling three days.

A period of stability and possibly even prosperity, one might imagine—but not according to modern scholarship, which views al-Muqtadir’s caliphate as an unmitigated disaster, a period when the glorious achievements of his ancestors such as Hārūn al-Rashīd were completely undone. State and caliphal treasuries were bedeviled by chronic lack of funds, with variable revenues from tax and trade. Caliphs and their viziers were constantly caught short of ready money. The fortunes of the recent caliphs had teetered constantly on the brink of bankruptcy.

Upon al-Muqtadir’s accession to the caliphate, the rule of al-Muktafī (289–95/902–8) had witnessed a revival in the establishment of caliphal control. The western provinces, Syria and Egypt, had been brought into line, the Qarmaṭians had been defeated by Waṣīf ibn Sawārtakīn the Khazar (294/906–7), and the coffers of the treasury were adequately stocked, to the sum of 15 million dinars.

During al-Muqtadir’s caliphate, however, the center once again began to lose its grip on the periphery. Egypt became the private preserve of the rival Faṭimid caliphate, Syria began to enjoy the protection of the Kurdish Ḥamdanid dynasty, and the Qarmaṭian threat erupted once more, in a series of daring raids on cities and caravans, culminating in the theft of the Black Stone from the Kaaba in 317/930, by the Qarmaṭian chieftain Abū Ṭāhir Sulaymān. The eastern provinces had already consolidated the autonomy of their rule. Armenia and Azerbaijan had become the exclusive domains of the caliphal appointed governor Muḥammad ibn Abī l-Sāj al-Afshīn, until his death in 288/901. Transoxania and, by 287/900, Khurasan were under Samanid rule, and Sīstān was the seat of the Šaffarids (247–393/861–1003), founded by the coppersmith Yaʿqūb ibn al-Layth, a frontier warrior (mutaṭawwi’) fighting the unbelievers to extend the rule of Islam.
In 309/921, the year the Volga mission left Baghdad, al-Muqtadir’s reign did enjoy some military success, when Muʾnis, the supreme commander of the caliphal armies, was invested with the governorship of Egypt and Syria, and the Samanids gained an important victory over the Daylamites of Ṭabaristān and killed al-Ḥasan ibn al-Qāsim’s governor of Jurjān, the redoubtable Daylamite warlord Līlī ibn al-Nuʿmān, near Ṭūs, an event to which Ibn Faḍlān refers (§4).

The treasury’s fiscal and mercantile revenues were heavily dependent on the success of the caliphal army, and no stability could be guaranteed. Apparently al-Muqtadir did not care in the least about stability: he is reputed to have squandered more than seventy million dinars.⁴

The dazzling might and splendor of the imperial Baghdad of al-Muqtadir’s reign were fabulously encapsulated in his palace complexes. I like in particular the spectacular Arboreal Mansion. This mansion housed a tree of eighteen branches of silver and gold standing in a pond of limpid water. Birds of gold and silver, small and large, perched on the twigs. The branches would move, and their leaves would move as if stirred by the wind. The birds would tweet, whistle, and coo. On either side of the mansion were arranged fifteen automata, knights on horseback, who performed a cavalry maneuver. The lavishness of this craftsmanship and the ingenuity of its engineering match the opulence of the caliphal architectural expenditure for which al-Muqtadir was rightly famed. The Arboreal Mansion was just one of the many awe-inspiring sights of the caliphal complex (which included a zoo, a lion house, and an elephant enclosure) on the left bank of the Tigris: one observer reckoned it to be the size of the town of Shiraz.

Al-Muqtadir remained caliph for many years, and his longevity was accompanied by a decline in administrative consistency. Fourteen different administrators held the office of vizier during the period. This was one of the secrets behind the length of al-Muqtadir’s rule: he, with the complicity of his bureaucracy, was following the precedent set by Hārūn al-Rashīd when, in 187/803,
Hārūn so spectacularly and inexplicably removed the Barmakid family from power. The financial expedient of *muṣādarah* ("multcation": the confiscation of private ministerial fortunes, a procedure usually accompanied by torture and beating) contributed to these changes, with courtly conspiracy and collusion the order of the day. We have an example of this in Ibn Faḍlān’s account, for the funds to cover the construction of the fort in Bulghar territory were to be acquired from the sale of an estate owned by a deposed vizier, Ibn al-Furāt (§§3, 5).

Baghdad, with its population of between a quarter and half a million people in the fourth/tenth century, was the world’s largest consumer of luxury goods, and trade was buoyant, but it was also a city on the brink of lawlessness and anarchy. It was poorly managed, food supplies were unreliable, famine was a regular occurrence, and prices were high. There were sporadic outbreaks of disease, largely because of the floods occasioned by municipal neglect of the irrigation system.

Factionalism was commonplace, and religious animosities, especially those between the Shi’i community and the Ḥanbalite Sunnis, under the energetic direction of the theologian and traditionist al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Ali ibn Khalaf al-Barbahārī (d. 329/941), frequently erupted into violence. Although doctrinally quietist and sternly opposed to formal political rebellion, the Ḥanbalites, followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), did not disregard divergent expressions of Islamic belief or public displays of moral laxity. They took to the streets of Baghdad on several occasions to voice their disapproval of the corruption of the times. The great jurist, exegete, and historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is thought to have incurred their wrath when he pronounced a compromise verdict on a theological dispute concerning the precise implications of Q Isrā’ 17:79:

Strive through the night—as an offering in hope that your Lord may raise you to a praiseworthy place.
This verse had been adopted by al-Barbahārī as a slogan, following the realist and anthropomorphic exegesis of it advocated by his teacher, al-Marwazī (d. 275/888). According to the Ḥanbalites, the verse declared that God would physically place Muḥammad on His throne on Judgment Day—anything less was tantamount to heresy. According to several sources, Ḥanbalite animosity to al-Ṭabarī persisted until his death, when a mob gathered at his home and prevented a public funeral being held in his honor. Al-Ṭabarī was buried in his home, under cover of darkness.

Ḩanbalite agitation was at its most violent in 323/935, when the caliph al-Rāḍī (r. 322–29/934–40) was compelled formally to declare Ğanbalism a heresy and to exclude the Ḥanbalites from the Islamic community.

And then the authorities had al-Ḩallāj to contend with. Abū l-Mughīth al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṅṣūr, known as al-Ḩallāj, “the Wool-Carder,” was a charismatic Sufi visionary. In the markets of Baghdad he preached a message of God as the One Truth, the Only Desire. He installed a replica of the Kaaba in his house and passed the night in prayer in graveyards. He appealed to the populace to kill him and save him from God, and, in a fateful encounter in the Mosque of al-Manṣūr in Baghdad, he is said to have exclaimed, “I am the Truth.” In other words, he shouted, he had no other identity than God.

The administration was terrified of the revolutionary appeal of al-Ḩallāj and considered him a threat to the stability of the empire. He was arrested and an inquisition held. His main opponents were Ibn al-Furāt and Ḥāmid ibn al-ʿAbbās, both of whom feature in Ibn Faḍlān’s account. (It was one of Ibn al-Furāt’s estates that was to fund the building of the Bulghār fort, and Ḥāmid ibn al-ʿAbbās provided the mission with a letter for the king of the Bulghārs.) It was a singular event to see both men in agreement in their opposition to al-Ḩallāj. They so hated one another that, when Ibn al-Furāt had been accused of financial corruption and removed from the vizierate, Ḥāmid, who was to replace him, was restrained from a vicious attempt to pull out Ibn al-Furāt’s beard! Al-Ḩallāj was executed.
on March 26, 922, two months before the mission reached the Bulghārs.5

It was from this “City of Peace” that the embassy departed, following the Khurasan highway, but the first leg of their journey was fraught with danger. They made their way to Rayy, the commercial capital of al-Jībāl province. In military terms, this was one of the most hotly contested cities in the whole region. In 311/919, two years before the departure of the mission, Ibn Faḍlān’s patron Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān had been killed in a failed attempt to oust the Daylamite Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī from control of the city. Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī was later formally invested by Baghdad as governor of Rayy (307–11/919–24). At the time of the mission, then, the caliphate, the Samanids, and the Zaydī Daylamites were engaged in constant struggle for control of the region.

There were other powerful local actors at work in the area, too. Ibn Abī l-Sāj, the governor of Azerbaijan, was a force to be reckoned with. So too was Ibn Qārin, the ruler of Fīrūn and the representative of the Caspian Zaydī dāʾī al-Ḥasan ibn al-Qāsim. Al-Ḥasan ibn al-Qāsim was the successor to al-Uṭrūsh (“the Deaf”) (d. 304/917), restorer of Zaydī Shi’ism in Ṭabaristān and Daylam. Both were powerful men hostile to Abbasids and Samanids. This is why Ibn Faḍlān notes, with some relief, that Līlī ibn Nuʿmān, a Daylamite warlord in the service of al-Uṭrūsh and al-Ḥasan ibn al-Qāsim, had been killed shortly before the embassy reached Nishapur (§4), and why he points out that, in Nishapur, they encountered a friendly face in Ḥammawayh Kūsā, Samanid field marshal of Khurasan. The mission thus made its way briskly through a dangerous region and, in order to proceed to Bukhara, successfully negotiated its first major natural obstacle, the Karakum desert.

Such was the world in which the caliphal envoys lived and against which Ibn Faḍlān would measure the peoples and persons he met on his way to the Volga.
Why?

Why did Caliph al-Muqtadir agree to the king’s petition? What did the court seek to achieve? What were the motives behind the mission? The *khwārazm-shāh* in Kāth (Khwārazm) (§8) and the four chieftains of the Ghuzziyyah assembled by Atrak ibn al-Qaṭaghān (§33) are suspicious of Baghdad’s interest in spreading Islam among the Bulghār. The Samanid emir shows no interest in the mission. He was still a teenager, after all (§5). Should we be suspicious too or emulate the teenage emir?

The king asked the caliph for instruction in Islamic law and ritual practice, a mosque and a *minbar* to declare his fealty to the caliph as part of the Friday prayer, and the construction of a fort. The Baghdad court’s reasons for acceding to the request are not specified. There is no discussion in the account of the lucrative trade route that linked Baghdad, Bukhara, and Volga Bulgharia; of the emergence of the Bulghār market as a prime source of furs and slaves; or of the Viking lust for silver dirhams that largely fuelled the northern fur and slave trade. Yet there are hints. We learn of the political and religious unrest in Khurasan (bad for the secure passage of trade goods), of the autonomy of the Samanid emirate in Bukhara, and of how jealously the trade links between Bukhara, Khwārazm, and the Turks of the north were protected by the Samanid governor of Khwārazm.

Scholars have speculated on the motives of the mission. Was it intended somehow to bypass the Samanid emirate and secure the Bulghār market for Baghdad? International diplomacy did not exist in isolation but was in many ways the official handmaiden of mercantile relations. Trade was fundamental to the economies of the northern frontier and also a factor in the commission of the embassy: a fort, along the lines of Sarkel on the Don, would have provided the Muslims with a stronghold from which to resist the Khazars and control the flow of trade through the confluence of the Volga and the Kama and would have been a statement of Islamic presence in
the area. Or is this speculation just the imposition on the fourth/tenth century of our own obsessions with economic viability?

For Shaban, this diplomatic adventure was a “full-fledged trade mission... a response to a combined approach by Jayhānī and the chief of the Bulghār.” Shaban thinks the Volga mission was a cooperative venture between the Samanids and Abbasids masterminded by al-Jayhānī, an assertion for which there is no shred of evidence. He reasons that the Samanids needed allies to help control the Turkic tribes north of Khwārazm.⁶

Togan, who discovered the Mashhad manuscript in 1923, suggested that conversion to Islam as conceived and practiced by the caliphal court in such a distant outpost of the empire would have acted as a corrective to Qarmāṭian propaganda, to Zoroastrian prophecies of the collapse of the caliphate at the hands of the Majūs (a name, in Arabic texts of the period, for fire-worshippers, i.e., both Zoroastrians and Vikings!), and to Shi’i missionary activity, and would have countered the spread of any of these influences among the already volatile Turkic tribes.⁷ Togan was a Bashkir Bolshevik who had fallen out with Lenin over policies concerning Togan’s native Tataristan and was living in exile in Iran. It is hardly surprising that he read the mission in such richly ideological terms.

According to one commentator, the court must have reasoned that, by controlling how the Volga Bulghārs observed Islamic ritual, it could control their polity, a position that owes more to modern notions of political Islam than to an understanding of the fourth/tenth century.⁸

Do we need to be so suspicious? Of course, the religious overtones of the king’s petitions were sure to appeal to the caliph and his court. Here was a foreign ruler who had embraced Islam, requesting religious instruction, as well as the construction of a mosque and a minbar from which he could acknowledge the caliph’s suzerainty, and seeking assistance against unspecified enemies, presumably the Khazars, although the Rus’ always represented a threat. The construction of a fort on the Volga bend would have followed...
the precedents set by both Rørík’s hill-fort, built by the Rus’, and Sarkel, built on the Don by the Byzantines for the Khazars.

It might be helpful to take a brief look at some disparate examples of the Christian ideology of trade, travel, warfare, and expansion. In 1433, Dom Manuel justifies the Portuguese voyages of discovery:

not only with the intention that great fame and profit might follow to these kingdomes from the riches that there are therein, which were always possessed by the Moors, but so that the faith of Our Lord should be spread through more parts, and His Name known.9

Jonathan Riley-Smith has argued that religion and self-interest were inseparable in the outlook of the early Crusaders.10 Stephen Greenblatt discusses the “formalism” of Columbus’s “linguistic acts,” and Margarita Zamora draws attention to the equal weight given spiritual and worldly (i.e., commercial) ambitions in the “Letter to the Sovereigns.”11 Christopher Hill has been the most persistent and persuasive exponent of the religiosity of the seventeenth-century Puritan worldview, in which every aspect of man’s behavior is seen through a religious prism.12 In the wake of the feting of William Dampier upon the publication of his New Voyage round the World in 1697, the Royal Society urged seamen to greater scientific precision in their journals, “to improve the stock of knowledge in the world and hence improve the condition of mankind.”13 And by improving “the condition of mankind,” we can savor the ambiguity between Enlightenment reason and the mission civilatrice that would come with conversion to Christianity.

It is muddle-headed to consider religious motives as mere justification for interference in “foreign” affairs. The caliphal court would not have known what we mean by these distinctions. Such a line of reasoning attempts to separate and differentiate between a mutually inclusive set of notions: missionary activity, conversion, trade, and expansion of the caliphate. What I am advocating is respect for the integrity of Ibn Faḍlān’s account.
Yāqūt’s Quotations

The Arabic text of Ibn Faḍlān’s book exists in two formats: as part of a manuscript contained in the library attached to the Mausoleum of the imam ʿAlī al-Riḍā in Mashhad, Iran, discovered in 1923 by A. Zeki Validi Togan (the text translated in this book as *Mission to the Volga*); and as six quotations in Yāqūt’s *Muʿjam al-buldān* (*Dictionary of Places*) (also translated in this book).

Yāqūt ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Rūmī al-Ḥamawī (574–75/1179–1229) was a biographer and geographer renowned for his encyclopedic writings. “Al-Rūmī” (“the man from Rūm”) refers to his Byzantine descent, and “al-Ḥamawī” connects him with Ḥāmah, in Syria. In his topographical dictionary *Kitab Muʿjam al-buldān*, he included quotations from Ibn Faḍlān’s account, which remained the principal vestiges of the work until Togan’s discovery of the Mashhad manuscript in 1923.

The geographical dictionary of Yāqūt includes excerpts from Ibn Faḍlān’s book in six lemmata:

1. Itil: Wüstenfeld 1.112.16–113.15 = Mashhad 208a.4–208b.9 → §68 of the present translation.
4. Khazar: Wüstenfeld 2.436.20–440.6 (only 2.438.11–14 matches the extant text in the Mashhad manuscript) = Mashhad 212b.15–19 = §90 of the present translation.

Yāqūt frequently remarks that he has abbreviated Ibn Faḍlān’s account, occasionally criticizes him, and expresses disbelief in his version of events. He stresses that his quotation of Ibn Faḍlān’s passage on the Rūs is accurate and implies that it is a verbatim quotation. This raises, in my mind, the possibility that Yāqūt may not be quoting Ibn Faḍlān so accurately in the other five lemmata. And a close comparison between the passages on the Rūs in both sources reveals that, here too, Yāqūt’s quotation may not, strictly speaking, be verbatim but may have been subjected to modification, paraphrasing, and rewording. (I say “may have been” because it is likely that Yāqūt was quoting from an ancestor to the actual Mashhad manuscript.) Furthermore, in the lemma devoted to the Khazars, Yāqūt confuses quotations drawn from al-Iṣṭakhrī’s mid-fourth/tenth century work Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik (The Book of Highways and Kingdoms) with the quotation he took from Ibn Faḍlān, although it is also possible that this section of the Khazars has been taken from al-Iṣṭakhrī’s text and added to Ibn Faḍlān’s account by the compiler of the Mashhad manuscript.

For the sake of completeness and in order to make clear the differences between Yāqūt’s versions and the work translated as Mission to the Volga, I include Yāqūt’s quotations from Ibn Faḍlān translated from Wüstenfeld’s edition; please note, I have not consulted any of the manuscripts of Yāqūt’s Mu‘jam al-buldān but have relied instead on Wüstenfeld’s edition. In order to facilitate comparison between these quotations and the version of the text contained in the Mashhad manuscript, I have included in the translation of these quotations the paragraph numbers from Mission to the Volga to which Yāqūt’s quotations correspond.14
Ibn Faḍlān’s Logbook: An Imagined Reconstruction

I present here a shortened version of Ibn Faḍlān’s text, an experiment in reconstructing the logbook that I imagine Ibn Faḍlān might have kept while on his travels. My version of the logbook ends abruptly. Of course this is an imagined reconstruction and I could have terminated it at the beginning of the list of Bulghār marvels (to which the description of the Rūs belongs). 15

Names

One of the wonderful things about Ibn Faḍlān’s account is that we get to hear about so many unfamiliar places and, in the process, are introduced to many Turkic terms transcribed (presumably aurally and phonetically) into Arabic, and to listen to so many non-Arabs speak, via the intermediary of the translator(s) Ibn Faḍlān used. Of course, this abundance of transcriptions is rarely graphically straightforward.

There is confusion surrounding the “correct” form of the toponyms and Turkic titles in which the text abounds. Whenever possible I have relied on the many studies of Turkic names and titles by scholars such as Peter Golden. The onomastic challenge is especially acute in the riverine topography of the journey from the Ghuzziyyah to the Bulghārs: §§34–38. A uniform solution to these names proved impossible, so I decided to apply a principle of minimal intervention. When the identity of the river proposed by scholars seemed close to the form of the word as written by the Mashhad scribe I accepted the reconstructed identification and made as few changes as possible to the form of the name given in the manuscript. The principle of minimal intervention means, for example, that the word suh becomes sūḥ and not sūkh, and bājāʾ does not become bājāgh. Please note, however, that h*j (the “*” is used here and in a few other cases to represent an undotted consonant in the manuscript that could be read as bāʾ, tāʾ, thāʾ, nūn, or yāʾ) became jaykh. I have avoided, wherever possible, the addition of vowels to the consonantal skeleton of
these names. On one occasion I could not decide whether the word smwr masked s-mūr or s-mawr, so I let it stand.

This procedure of minimal intervention is not an argument for the onomastic accuracy of the manuscript. There has undoubtedly been considerable corruption in transmission, and the scribe of the Mashhad manuscript is not always as reliable as we might like. The procedure is simply a not very subtle solution to an impasse. I use the Glossary of Names and Terms to discuss Turkic terms and names and to survey the identifications offered by scholars.

In the two cases in which we are fortunate to have lemmata in Yāqūt’s Mu‘jam al-buldān (Itīl and Arthakhushmīthan), I have adopted his orthography and vocalization.

**My Translation**

Ibn Faḍlān’s text is brisk and characterized by narrative economy. I wanted my English to be the same. My translation aspires to lucidity and legibility. James E. McKeithen’s excellent PhD thesis (Indiana University, 1979) will satisfy the reader in search of a crib of the Arabic. There are two other translations into English, by Richard N. Frye (2005) and by the late Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (2012). They are both admirable: Frye’s is very useful for the studies he provides alongside the translation, and Lunde and Stone have produced a nicely readable version of the work. Both, however, effectively promote a version of Ibn Faḍlān’s text dominated by Yāqūt’s quotations.

I have also added to the translation some headers, toponyms, and ethnonyms that help identify the principal agents and locations of the action.

The Guide to Further Reading is intended to provide readers, students, and scholars interested in studying the work further with a representative catalogue of secondary scholarship on Ibn Faḍlān and his world. For ease of reference, it is therefore organized according to subject. I hope this will be a useful study aid to what can sometimes be a complicated bibliographical tumult.
I have also prepared the Glossary as a repository of information that, in a publication intended for an academic audience, might be included in the form of annotations to the text. This approach has the added advantage of keeping to a minimum both the glossary and the annotation to the translation. Each glossary entry includes key references to the copious annotations provided by the scholars who have edited and/or translated the work. I hope that, in this way too, this version of the glossary can become a useful study aid.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, Ibn Faḍlan’s account is in many ways a strange book. It has no textual analogues, no other works from the third/ninth or fourth/tenth centuries we can compare it with. Its obsession with eyewitness testimony, connected ultimately with the practice of, and requirements for, giving witness in a court of law, is almost pathological. It contains many wonderful encounters, conversations, dialogues, and formal audiences—and we hear so many non-Muslims speak, from tribesmen of the Ghuzziyyah and the Bulghār king to the Rūs who mocks Ibn Faḍlān for the primitiveness of his religious observances. On top of all this, it is a cracking good read. I hope others enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed translating it and, along the way, kept alive my boyhood love of adventure stories.