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Scandinavian/Rus' Captives and Slave Soldiers: an Eastern Perspective

Abstract

During the Viking Age (c. AD 750–1050), the Rus', an inclusive group of warrior-merchants of mainly Scandinavian origin – owning and trading slaves – were active in the East (in this case the eastern Baltic region, European Russia, Belarus, the Ukraine, the Black Sea region, Byzantium, the Caucasus, and beyond).

There are several written accounts of Rus' taken captive in the East during the Viking Age, including information about some of them ending up as slaves. This article will examine different fates of Rus' captives in these areas, on the basis of contemporary Byzantine, Muslim – and to a limited extent – later Old Slavic and Old Norse written accounts.

The sources reveal that the captured Scandinavian/Rus' warriors often were victims of a special type of subjugation: 'slave soldiery'. This status will be contrasted to other types of militarily subordination to illuminate the relative social standings of such warrior groups in the East.

Introduction

Viking Age Scandinavian slavers and traders active in the East (in this case signifying the eastern Baltic region, European Russia, Belarus, the Ukraine, the Black Sea region, Byzantium, the Caucasus and beyond), usually appeared under the contested designations Rus', or Varangians in contemporary sources. Rus' identity is ambiguous inasmuch as the word variously refers to Slavs, Scandinavians, or an amalgamation of ethnic groups. The term has been the subject of long-standing controversy, and is today mostly understood as either a gradually developing hybrid ethnic group, incorporating not only Slavic and Scandinavian but also Finno-Ugric, Baltic, and Turkic elements. It has also been described as a professional association of warrior-merchants mainly dominated by a Scandinavian elite intermingling with local population (Melnikova and Petrukhin 1990–1; Golden 1995; Montgomery 2010). Despite the ethnic inclusivity of the term, the close connections of the Rus' and wider parts of the Viking diaspora makes it unequivocal that a considerable portion of this group came from a Scandinavian milieu, or at least shared, and maintained that her-

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itage. Hence the Rus' should be viewed as part of the Viking context also visible in the West, rather than in isolation (Tolochko 2015: 11, 142–9; Shepard 2015; Price 2020: 400–43). Another term, Varangian, initially appears in sources from the 11th century and denotes professional warrior groups, mostly of Nordic composition (Androshchuk 2004–5). For the sake of clarity, my discussion will be confined to the Rus', with occasional references to the broader Scandinavian context.

Various written sources report that during the latter parts of the Viking Age the Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and Baltic populations of the East were dominated by a Scandinavian, later Rus' elite (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 59–61, 71, 78, 81, 84; Moravcsik 1967: 60–3; Göckenjan and Zimonyi 2011: 81–2, 180, 234; Lunde and Stone 2012: 112; Montgomery 2014: 242–3). The resulting slave trade and other trading activities, have yielded thousands of Arabic dirham coin finds both in the East and in Scandinavia, drawing attention to the extensive network, and contemporary relevance of such trade, while also emphasising the Scandinavians' role as traders of slaves and other goods, within it. These phenomena are at the forefront of recent scholarly inquiries (Valante 2013; Fontaine 2017; Jankowiak 2017; Raffield 2019; Gruszczyński et al. 2020), and link to the topic of Scandinavian slavery, which has a longer research history (Karras 1988; Iversen 1997; Lindkvist and Myrdal 2003; Brink 2008, 2012).

Figure 1. Rus' in the East. Rus' settlement in the East during the 9th and 10th centuries. Map: Béla Nagy. Reproduced with kind permission.

None of these studies, however, called attention to written sources indicating that groups containing Scandinavians, most notably the Rus', were subject to captivity and became enslaved by various peoples in the East: including Byzantines, Muslims and various tribes of the steppe, for instance the Magyars, Pechenegs and Khazars. My article will examine Scandinavian and Rus' captivity and slavery in these areas, based on contemporary Byzantine and Muslim accounts supplemented with evidence from Old Slavic, and Old Norse retrospective sources. I have gathered all contemporary material that deals with issues related to Viking Age captured Scandinavians, from edited texts that are known to me, while in the case of retrospective sources the investigation was restricted to specific episodes.

My first aim is to critically review the entire corpus to identify captive Scandinavians in the East, most importantly Rus'. Throughout the review, I will explore the wide variety of fates that these captives were subject to, as well as contemporary attitudes towards captives and captivity.

This leads on to my second aim, a detailed investigation of the living conditions of the captives forced into military slavery. This term is mainly employed by scholars in a Muslim context, referring to soldiers abducted – or traded – from other societies and forced to serve as professional soldiers in Muslim states from the 9th century onwards. These 'slave soldiers' should be seen as a separate category from other slaves occasionally taking arms in conflicts (Crone 1980; Pipes 1981, 5–23; Kennedy 1986: 158–60, 206–10). The main focus here will be how to describe the status of these so called 'slave soldiers' in relation to other military positions that were – perhaps – no less subordinate in nature. Three 10th-century passages, by Mas'ūdī; Ibn Faḍlān; and the author of the *Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb*, will be used, each describing Rus' warrior groups who – in one way or another – can be described as 'slave soldiers': I include both military slaves and mercenaries in this category, who although technically and legally free might have endured similar conditions as military (or other) slaves.

Since the descriptions are scant, a closer scrutiny based on their terminologies and semantics will be included, and passages will be compared with analogous historical examples drawn from the Mid-Eurasian steppe region (as in present day Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Russia, the Caucasus, Kazakhstan and Mongolia), Byzantium, as well as the Islamic world, and the Scandinavian sphere. These will aid my assessment of the social status of warrior groups with Scandinavian affiliations in the East.

Material and methods

The first group of contemporary sources consists of Muslim historical and geographical works, based on the lost 10th-century Ġayhānī and al-Balkhī traditions. Authors drawing on the former are Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, and the later Marwazī, while the latter is represented by Iṣṭakhrī and Ibn Hauqal. Relevant details are also revealed by individual authors from the 10th century, such as Ibn Faḍlān, Mas'ūdī and Ibn Miskawayh, as well as from the 11th century, such as Ibn Al-Athīr, and the anonymous author of *Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb*. The other cluster of contemporary (10th century) sources are Byzantine works, namely *The chronicle of Leo Diaconus*; the diplomatic book *De administrando imperio*, assembled in the court of Emperor Kōnstantinos VII; and clauses of the Rus'-Byzantine peace treaties preserved in the 12th-century Old Slavic *Povest' Vremennykh Let* (PVL), commonly known as *The*

Russian Primary Chronicle. Occasional references to sources less central to the argument will also be used (e.g. the 10th-century Hebrew *Schechter letter*; or details traceable to the 11th century found in the later Georgian chronicles). All of these sources yield information written during the Viking Age with a focus on the 10th century, although some may have been recorded later. Later sources include brief episodes of Icelandic family and kings' sagas (*Óláfs saga Tryggvassonar*, *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, *Orkneyinga saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*), and the mentioned PVL. These, despite having a Viking Age setting, were committed to parchment later than the events they describe. Nevertheless, they are based on long standing oral traditions, which makes them useful as comparative material.

Given the miscellaneous nature of the source material, all of the texts present challenges, and require a variety of source critical strategies. Although most of the Muslim and Byzantine accounts were written to provide reliable information for state purposes, it does not guarantee that they are devoid of fallacies. Other issues may result from late recording; and/or copying; the application of *topoi*; or distortions derived from applying an outside perspective. These challenges have to be tackled individually: e.g. by tracing the original provenance of particular passages (i.e. when their contemporaneity is in doubt), by supporting statements with controlled source material, or by situating descriptions within the cultural milieu in which they were produced.

From the outset, it is necessary to attempt to briefly clarify the relationship between captivity and slavery. It is beyond controversy that warfare was one of the main sources of slaves, and that slavers were active both in the western and eastern Viking sphere (Fontaine 2017: 106–10). However, not all captives ended up as slaves, some were massacred on site; while others were ransomed; exchanged for other prisoners; reduced to temporary field work; simply released; or – as this article will show – impressed into the victor's army (Patterson 1982: 106–9). Contrary to the transient state of captivity, slavery meant a permanent alienation from natal kin, and loss of previous status, becoming 'socially dead' (Patterson 1982: 38–45).

That said, due to a wide variety of slave conditions, boundaries between free and unfree are often obscure in the sources, especially when compared to other statuses of dependence. The extensive semantic slave terminology in Scandinavian Viking Age-related sources allows for a distinction between different types of slaves. Relative to other subordinate people some were held in high esteem due to their expertise, or their specific duties, sometimes even in comparison to those who were regarded as legally free (Brink 2012: 19–36, 121–68). In order to meet the described challenge, I will make comparisons – partly employing a cross-cultural analysis – between the Rus' 'slave soldiers' and the host societies' own subordinate warrior groups, aided by associated social or legal concepts.

Results: Scandinavian and Rus' captives in the East

The Rus' were usually praised for their martial skills and physical prowess, although some written accounts mention their inferiority in mounted warfare, such as Ibn Rusta, Marwazī, Ibn Miskawayh, and Leo Diaconus (Göckenjan and Zimonyi 2011: 85, 254; Minorsky 1942: 36; Margoliouth 1921: 67; Hase 1828: 134). Consequently, armies including Scandinavians occasionally suffered terrible defeats from nomads, Byzantines, and Muslims, cultures with well-developed cavalries, and advanced military technologies. Major defeats are recorded by Mas'ūdī (AD 913) (Lunde and Stone 2012: 144–6), *The*

Russian Primary Chronicle (in AD 941, 1018 and 1043) (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 71–2, 132, 138–9), *The Schechter letter* (AD 940) (Golb and Pritsak 1982: 115–21), Ibn Miskawayh (AD 943) (Margoliouth 1921: 67–74), and Leo Diaconus (AD 971) (Hase 1828: 142–57). It is fair to surmise that such defeats resulted in Rus' prisoners.

This assumption is reinforced by two accounts in which Rus' warriors are described as being wary of captivity. The first was written by the Byzantine historian, Leo Diaconus, who made use of an eyewitness accompanying Emperor Iōánnēs ho Tzimiskēs (AD 969–76) on his campaign against the Rus' in AD 971 (Kaldellis 2013: 102–5). In his description of a battle against the army of the Rus' Grand Prince Sviatoslav (AD 945–72), Leo cites a custom thought to be generally used among the Rus', whom he – according to Byzantine history-writing – labels as 'Tauroscythians':

This also is said about the Tauroscythians, that never up until now had they surrendered to the enemy when defeated; but when they lose hope of safety, they drive their swords into their vital parts, and thus kill themselves. And they do this because of the following belief: they say that if they are killed in battle by the enemy, then after their death and the separation of their souls from their bodies they will serve their slayers in Hades. And the Tauroscythians dread such servitude, and, hating to wait upon those who have killed them, inflict death upon themselves with their own hands. Such is the belief that prevails among them (Talbot and Sullivan 2005: 195).

Leo himself admits that his reports may be conjecture – since it is only 'said about the Tauroscythians' – and it has been argued that he is in fact mistaken in attributing this habit to the Rus' instead of to Sviatoslav's nomadic allies (Tarras 1965: 401). These allies, however, had already deserted Sviatoslav at this stage of the campaign, which suggests that the custom was instead connected to a nomadic influence within the Rus' (see on p. 11).

Even if Leo's report was unsubstantiated hearsay, it must still reflect a persistent and widespread misconception, since similar Rus' behaviour is noted in an almost identical situation, by unrelated commentators. Building on information from several sources the contemporary Persian geographer, Ibn Miskawayh, noted that during a Rus' raid on the Muslim town of Bardha'a in AD 943 the Muslim forces were unable to capture any of five fierce Rus' warriors barricaded in a garden, as 'none of them would capitulate'. The last survivor was a 'beardless lad', who when he 'perceived that he was going to be captured [...] kept slashing away at his vital parts with his scimitar till he fell dead' (Margoliouth 1921: 73–4). Although Miskawayh's record lacks an explanation of the underlying beliefs, his description is strikingly similar to Leo's, and may be explained from the same presumptions, or alternatively from Old Norse religious views related to a glorious death in battle (Edholm 2020: 219).

There is, however, also ample evidence for Rus' warriors being captured. The 10th century peace treaties, agreed after Rus'-Byzantine wars, mention both Byzantine and Rus' enslaved captives. Despite not being written down until several centuries later in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, the authenticity of its accounts of the peace treaties are rarely questioned, since they clearly mirror Viking Age legislations, and related practices (Stein-Wilkeshuis 2002). One of the articles in the AD 912 peace treaty suggests that Rus' captives (*plēn'nitsi*) could also be found in other places than Byzantium:

[...] if a prisoner of either nation is in durance either of the Russes or of the Greeks, and then sold into another country, any Russ or Greek who happens to be in that locality shall purchase the prisoner and return the person thus purchased to his own native country [...] If any Russ be taken prisoner by the Greeks, he shall likewise be sent back to his native land, and his purchase price shall be repaid [...] (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 67).

A subsequent treaty from AD 945 even specifies that the Rus' could be ransomed if they were 'found labouring as slaves in Greece, providing they are prisoners of war' (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 75).

Sometimes defeated soldiers were less lucky. Examples of the maiming of Rus' captives are found in *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. In AD 1043, the last large Rus' attack against Byzantium was launched, and around 800 Rus' soldiers were captured by Byzantine forces, who blinded many of them (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 138). Another commentator of the attack, Ibn Al-Athīr, speaks of Rus' warriors having their right hands cut off, and remarks that 'only a few Rus warriors who were [held as] captives with the son of the Rus king were allowed to leave [unharmd]' (Watson 2001: 437). Maiming was not unique to this campaign. A Rus' leader fighting on the Byzantine side in the AD 1071 battle of Manzikert, was captured and taken before the sultan to have his nose cut off (Watson 2001: 437). Other sources suggest that the fates of Rus' captives recorded in the Rus'-Byzantine wars in the 970s varied; on one occasion the Byzantines returned Rus' captives to their comrades stationed in Preslav, but on a later occasion they executed Rus' soldiers, who had been captured during an ambush (Hase 1828: 138–41).

This list of fates suggests that forced captivity mainly affected warrior groups. It is, however, possible that parts of the Scandinavian population, who had settled and merged with local Slavs and other Eastern peoples, also fell victim to enslavement. A conjectural case is presented in *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. After his Kievan campaign in AD 1018, the Duke of Poland, Bolesław the Brave (AD 992–1025), returned home with 800 prisoners, some who had been the property of Yaroslav the Wise, others part of his nobility – the boyars, and both his sisters (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 132). However, in AD 1043, as part of a dynastic marriage pact, all these captives were returned to Yaroslav's court (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 138–9).

Partly basing his observations on the works of earlier scholars, the 11th-century Persian Abū Sa'īd Gardīzī reported in his *Zayn al-aḡbār* (The Ornament of Histories) about the Magyars (Hungarians) – a nomadic tribe inhabiting the south Russian and Ukrainian steppe from the mid- to late 9th century – who repeatedly raided the neighbouring region north of the steppe: 'The Hungarians [...] go [forth] on raids against the Saqlābs and Rus. They bring back slave[s] (or captive[s] *barde*) thence, take them to the Byzantine [country] and sell them' (Martinez 1982: 161–2). Although this account was written down in the 11th century, when the Magyars were no longer nomadic and had settled in the Carpathian Basin, the locations and lifestyle described in the text suggest that the account refers to events in the 9th century. This seems likely, since Gardīzī was building on the earlier tradition of the 9th-century geographer Ḡayhānī, whose work is lost (Zimonyi 2015: 19–20, 309–15). According to another source the Magyars led their Slavic slaves to the Byzantine market of Kerch in the Crimea (Lunde and Stone 2012: 121). It is noteworthy that Gardīzī's text differentiates between the Rus' and the *Saqāliba* (rendered here as *Saqlābs*). Both terms were probably used more inclusively than as pure ethnic markers, merely distinguishing between Scandinavians and Slavs (cf. Guichard and Meouak 1995; Ayalon 1999: 349–52), and in this context they may refer to people from both ethnic groups, perhaps describing the occupations of the captured, their social standing, or mixed ethnicity.

It is, however, difficult to confirm the validity of Gardīzī's statement. He was, as stated above, using earlier accounts, and my control source, Ibn Rusta in his *Kitāb al-A'lāk*

an-Nafisa (Book of Precious Objects), only mentions Slavs as captives in the 9th-century Magyar raids. Even if Gardīzī is correct in adding the Rus' as potential targets of nomadic raids (cf. Minorsky 1942: 35; Zimonyi 2015: 309–15), there is some doubt regarding whether Scandinavians had appeared in the Middle Dnieper area as early as the 9th century, when these raids supposedly took place (Franklin and Shepard 1996: 98–109).

The same problem applies to another account, regarding similar events. After leaving their headquarters in the Dnieper area in AD 895, the Magyars migrated to the Carpathian Basin, and on their way passed Kiev. According to a prominent – but from a source-critical point of view contested – source, the 12th-century Hungarian account called the *Gesta Hungarorum*, serious hostilities broke out at Kiev, ending in victory for the united Magyar tribes, who then forced the 'Ruthenes' to pay tribute, and send their sons as hostages (Bak and Rady 2010: 20–7). As in the case of Gardīzī's account, the validity of the Magyar capture of Scandinavians can only be corroborated by the 9th-century chronology of *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. If it is correct, Askold and Dir and their retinues resided in Kiev from the 860's, and Oleg took up residence in AD 882, (Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 60–1), which means that they could have suffered Magyar raids.

For my argument the accuracy of these sources is less important than the fact that they provide credible support for nomadic raids actually affecting the Rus'. Such an example is recorded from the 10th century, when another nomadic tribe, the Pechenegs, replaced the Magyars as southern neighbours to the Kievan Rus'. Similarly to the Magyars, the Pechenegs partly sustained themselves through plunder. According to the *De administrando imperio*, the Pechenegs 'can easily come upon the country both of the Russians and of the Turks, and enslave their women and children and ravage their country' (Moravcsik 1967: 50–3). Such nomadic raids would have resulted in warrior and/or settler captives, emphasising the vulnerability of all societal strata of the Rus'.

Figure 2. The Pechenegs slaughter the 'skyths' of Sviatoslav I of Kiev. From the *Chronicle of Ioannes Skylitzes*: '[...] When Sviatoslav was making his way back home, as he passed through the land of the Patzinaks, he fell into ambushes already prepared to take him. He and the entire host that accompanied him were completely annihilated, so angry were the Patzinaks with him for having made a treaty with the Romans [...]' (*A Synopsis of Byzantine History, AD 811–1057*: Translated by John Wortley, in: John Skylitzes: Translation and Notes, p. 293) Manuscript: Skylitzes Matritensis, fol. 173r. CCO

There are additional examples of Scandinavian groups and individuals being captured. One concerns a Varangian mercenary force, which was engaged in the Georgian civil wars of the mid-11th century, where 700 out of 3,000 of its soldiers were captured in the Battle of Sasireti in 1042. The original text of the Georgian chronicles (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*), states that the Varangian prisoners were given provisions and later withdrew through the Likhi mountain range (Shepard 1984–5: 279). Other accounts found in episodes of the Icelandic sagas, confirm that not even high-ranking individuals were spared from captivity. One notable example is the capture of the later Norwegian king, Óláfr Tryggvason and his mother, who are said to have been enslaved for years by Estonian pirates (Aðalbjarnarson 2002 a: 230, 301). Another example would be Haralðr Sigurðarsson, whose saga describes his imprisonment by the Byzantine Emperor (Aðalbjarnarson 2002 b: 85).

To sum up, the review of historical sources reveals that captivity seems to have been a dreaded possibility for Scandinavians and Rus', one which may not only have been associated with afterlife slave service, but could also have resulted in forced manual labour, such as agricultural work; maiming; release; massacre; or becoming a slave trade commodity. Another option was being forced to become a fighter for a victor, a scenario that will be my focus below.

Discussion: What would becoming a 'slave' soldier entail?

Three other passages, from three different texts, require attention in relation to Rus' captivity and slavery. All sources concern the military aspects of the phenomena described, and all three deal with the employment of Rus' soldiers. The first source is a description of the Khazar army, by a Muslim geographer, al-Mas'ūdī, in his *Murūj al-Dahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems); the second is an account about a Rus' royal retinue, recounted by the Arabic diplomat, Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān in his *Risāla* (Account); and the third is a passage about Rus' *ghilmān* (slave soldiers?) in the 11th-century anonymous *Ta'rīkh Bāb al-abwāb* (History of Derbent), preserved in the later work of the Ottoman writer Münejjim-bashī.

The first text implies a special destiny for Rus' captives, meaning neither death nor 'traditional' enslavement – in the sense of physical work for someone else – although it does clearly imply subjugation. Mas'ūdī's account deals with Rus' and *Saqāliba* soldiers in the Khazar capital, Itil, in the Volga delta, c. AD 950: 'The Rus and the Slavs whom we have said are non-scripturalists are the soldiers of the King and his slaves' (Montgomery 2010: 162). The Arabic word '*abd*' (pl. '*abīd*') was used as a general term for slaves in the Islamic world (Brunschvig 1986), and it is interesting that the original Arabic text does not differentiate between the Rus', and the *Saqāliba*, as in one being soldier, and the other slave (de Meynard and de Courteille 1863: 12). Especially in the light of the previous discussion (i.e. the Rus' were frequently taken captive), hence, I am inclined to read the text *verbatim*, implying that both Rus', and *Saqāliba* were found among the slaves. Moreover, both groups were included in a special enslavement category: 'slave soldiers'. The exact implications of the term are difficult to discern, but certain interpretations of their tasks have been suggested by James E. Montgomery, who argues that they formed a Khazar version of the Varangian guard, known from Constantinople (Montgomery 2010: 161–4).

My interpretation of the role of the Rus' in the Khazar Khaganate's military forces is based on the inner martial structure of the Khaganate. Firstly, I rely on the fact that unlike bodyguards, the Rus' 'slave soldiers' – together with Muslim artisans and merchants – dwelled on the other side of the Volga river, totally separate from the Khazar ruler's palace and the quarters of his closest retinue, which consisted of ethnic Khazars (Lunde and Stone 2012: 133, 155; Montgomery 2014: 256–7). Secondly, the benefit of having a separate Rus' slave force is not obvious until it is related to other military contingents of the Khaganate, and perhaps, as Mas'ūdī's work states, that the Khazar rulers were not in full control of the main Muslim army in Itil. An instance that supports this is what happened after the Rus' plunder of Muslim territories in the Caspian region in AD 913, which ended with a Khazar Muslim massacre of the Rus' force. The Khazar ruler was unable to prevent his subjects from avenging the plunder despite the fact that earlier he himself had made a pact with the Rus' (Lunde and Stone 2012: 144–6). In addition, Mas'ūdī claims that the Khazar Muslims were unwilling to take up arms against their own. This was paired with fears that if the Christian and the Muslim population of Itil were to unite, the position of the Khazar ruler could be threatened (Lunde and Stone 2012: 133–4). These may have been two reasons for keeping Rus' and Slav 'slave soldiers' in Itil, since they would not have hesitated in fighting Muslims, and their presence could serve to counteract the disobedient and sometimes unreliable Muslim military contingent.

Thus, the information in Mas'ūdī's work provides further support for the conscription, or enslavement of captured Rus' into hostile armies suggested in my review of historical sources above. Also, there are analogous events involving other groups than the Rus', which confirm that the practice was common. There are, for instance, two descriptions of Magyar captured warriors integrated into local retinues. Liutprand of Cremona – a major source for 10th century Byzantine court politics – reports that in AD 966, 40 Magyar warriors were captured by Emperor Nikephoros Phokas II (AD 963–9), and that all of them were incorporated into the emperor's bodyguard (Becker 1915: 199). Magyars suffered a similar fate during an Andalusian raid in AD 942, when five captured soldiers were incorporated into the bodyguard of the Muslim Caliph, and were forced to convert to Islam (Elter 2009: 63). These Muslim and Byzantine practices did not merely affect nomadic captives but other peoples in the East as well (Rotman 2009: 27–47). Potential nomadic rivals of the Rus' in the East also enlarged their numbers through this principle, by adopting subjugated tribes into their own ranks.

Another type of subordinate military position – comparable with 'slave soldiery' – also existed, and appears in Ibn Faḍlān's famous travel narrative, written during his diplomatic mission from Baghdad to the Volga Bulghar court in AD 921–2, where he encountered the Rus'. Besides giving invaluable information on Rus' customs and ritual behaviour along the Volga, the Arab traveller described the court of a so called Rus' king (*malik*):

One of the customs of the king of the Rūs is to have 400 men in his palace, who are the bravest of his companions, men upon whom he can count. These are the men who die when he dies and allow themselves to be killed for him. Each of them has a slave girl who serves him, washes his head and prepares everything that he eats or drinks, and then there is another slave girl with whom he sleeps. These 400 men sit below the king's throne, which is immense and encrusted with the finest gems (Lunde and Stone 2012: 54–5).

Ibn Faḍlān did not visit the Rus' court himself, and hence his account has to be used with caution, since he may have been misled, or simply confused the information with that of the

Fig 3. The East in the 10th century. Ibn Faḍlān's route and place names mentioned in the text. Map: Béla Nagy. Reproduced with kind permission.

Khazar court, which he discusses in the ensuing passage (Montgomery 2014: 254–7). However, details of his description of the Rus' court find support in analogies from various other ethnic milieus, some of which indirectly contributed to the development of an eclectic Rus' culture. Traditional interpretations of Ibn Faḍlān's account suggests that it is the Germanic *comitatus* of the Rus' king that is described here, whose members served their lord within a patron-client context in exchange for favourable gifts, and who would correspondingly sacrifice themselves for him in battle. In such an honour-bound warrior ideology, outliving one's lord may have been a disgrace (cf. Smyser 1965: 102–3).

Based on Ibn Faḍlān's crucial sentence: 'These are the men who die when he dies and allow themselves to be killed for him', such an interpretation can be taken even further. In its original, *yuqṭalūna dūnahū* (Montgomery 2014: 252), this literally translates as 'they get killed without him'. This is indeed also how other translators interpret the passage: [they] 'are killed for his sake' (Frye 2005: 70–1), 'take a leave because of him' (Kovalevskiy 1956: 146), 'subject themselves to death for him' (Kovalevskiy 1956: 264, n. 880), or 'make themselves killed for him' (Canard 1988: 84; Simon 2007: 99). The explicit semantics of the first part of the sentence deals with the retainers' death upon their master's death, and the statement, that they 'die when he dies', alludes to the retinue's self-sacrifice upon their master's passing. Such a literary interpretation of the passage may raise some doubts but to my mind the historical circumstances in this ethno-cultural setting support such an interpretation.

The phenomenon thus described bears close resemblance to that of the *suttee*, or *sati*, the Indian custom where widows, or servants self-sacrificed – or more likely – were sacrificed

Fig 4. The Chernigov drinking horns. Nordic drinking horns embellished with Magyar and Khazar motifs from the famous Black Mound of the Rus' settlement at Chernigov. Published with kind permission from Oleksiy Komar.

upon the death of husband or masters. Although disputed, this seems to have been a practice among Viking Age Scandinavians (Brink 2012: 224–36; Edholm 2020: 214–22), and even more so among the Rus', as attested by several contemporary authors – Ibn Rusta, Mas'ūdī, Ibn Miskawayh, and Ibn Hauqal (Lunde and Stone 2012: 127, 132, 151; Birkeland 1954: 51). Ibn Faḍlān witnessed it during the funeral of an Rus' chieftain along the River Volga, where a slave girl was sacrificed upon her master's death (Montgomery 2014: 244–51).

Similar phenomenon regarding self-sacrificing allegiances to a lord, are also discernible in other slave-master relationships among the Rus'. One is actually discernible in the same Ibn Faḍlān account, about the sacrifice of the slave girl, which also contains information about her master who rested in Paradise among his male retainers, or slave soldiers (*ghilmān*) (Montgomery 2014: 246–9) (see p. 13). Ibn Faḍlān states that male servants were often asked whether they are willing to die with their lord and – although less frequently – sometimes volunteered (Montgomery 2014: 246–7). The accounts of Leo Diaconus, and Ibn Miskawayh, cited in the beginning of this article, both emphasise the importance of one's manner of death for the ensuing afterlife, and confirm that suicide was not alien to Rus' warriors.

In addition, direct analogies for a connection between beliefs regarding the afterlife, and the custom of mass sacrifices of – one’s own – soldiers are provided in texts dealing with the peoples of Eastern Eurasia. During the Viking Age such ideas were probably conveyed to the Rus’ by nomadic steppe tribes, having such a strong impact on them that they readily adopted selected elements of Eastern material culture, beliefs and ritual behaviour (Montgomery 2000: 4–5, 23; Izmailov 2003; Hraundal 2014). Among these is the belief alluded to in Leo’s description, namely that defeated enemies were believed to serve their victors in the afterlife. This was, evidently, a widespread and persistent traditional belief in steppe cultures, since similar descriptions are found among the early Turks, the Khazars, the Magyars, and the Oghuz’, as well as later among the Mongols (Katona 2020: 197). These accounts, based, for instance, on oral comments and eyewitness reports, were produced in distant cultural milieus, and are too specific to be simple *topoi*.

There is ample evidence of Eastern Eurasian mass sacrifices of one’s own retainers. Examples are found from Antiquity until the 13th century – describing larger retinues choosing to self-sacrifice – among Scythians, the Xiongnu, the Tibetans, the Turks, and even among Indians (Yule 1871: 276, 283–4, n. 5; Beckwith 2009: 13–24; Cunliffe 2015: 225–6, 272). I have chosen one account to demonstrate that these texts do not merely suggest symbolic sacrifices upon a master’s death but that it literally led to voluntary self-sacrifices of retainers. A Latin source, Alberic of Trois-Fontaines – based on well-informed intelligence – describes the death and burial of the Cuman chief, Prince Jonah, in Constantinople in 1241. In accordance with pagan tradition he was interred in a tumulus outside the city walls with 26 horses and eight armour bearers, who had volunteered to die with the ruler (Lat: *octo armigeri appensi sunt vivi a dextris et a sinistris et ita voluntarie mortui*) (Scheffer-Boichorst 1925: 950). This is corroborated by an archaeological find from the Tuva region of Russia, where a Scythian royal burial in Arzhan contained 15 retainers, and 160 horses, killed for the ritual (Cunliffe 2015: 189–91). Most accounts seem to suggest that it was the closest and most distinguished retainers of a ruler who were sacrificed, as in the case of the Rus’ king’s bravest companions (‘*ṣanādīd aṣḥābihi*’) and most trusted men (‘*ahl al-thiqā ‘indahu*’) (Montgomery 2014: 252–3).

I argue that mass-retinue sacrifice was a relatively common occurrence in eastern Eurasia, based on the sources mentioned in the previous paragraph. Likewise, I argue for links between Eastern and Rus’ beliefs in afterlife warrior servitude, based on the quotes from Leo Diaconus and Ibn Miskawayh. I have also found support for servant sacrifice among the Scandinavians and Rus’, which suggest that Ibn Faḍlān’s accounts – although partly based of hearsay – may have some historical credence. Although there is little evidence for mass-sacrifices of retinue members among the Rus’, it is likely that such traditions were upheld through the principle of selection – similar to the Cuman example, mentioned earlier. If that were the case, it is possible that a burial of an exceptional Rus’ ruler and his *comitatus* – in the cultural milieu of the steppes along the Volga – could have conformed to such customs, originating in Central Asia.

The ‘slave soldiers’ in Mas’ūdī’s text were most likely captured in battle, while Ibn Faḍlān’s account deals with the soldiers of the Rus’ king himself. Hence, the relationship of the latter should perhaps be examined more as a patron-client bond. In that case it would probably be more accurate to label these potentially self-sacrificing retainers as soldiers of diminished possibilities, and one cannot help to wonder how willingly – from a psycholog-

Fig 5. A nomadic axe found in the Kazan' region embellished with a scene from *Völsunga saga* (Sigurðr stabbing the dragon Fáfnir). The artefact is a vivid memento of cultural transfers taking place between Viking Age Scandinavians and the inhabitants of the steppe. Although the evidence is still fragmentary, traditional steppe culture type objects decorated with Nordic motifs, as well as 'Viking' objects inlaid with steppe culture motifs, are known from the archaeological records of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. Drawing: Krisztián Balla. Reproduced with kind permission.

ical perspective – these soldiers would have died for their commander (Taylor 2002: 96–108, 128–34). It also raises questions regarding how their social position limited their options, and restricted their free will, compared to the options available to 'slave soldiers'.

There is another account involving Rus' soldiers in the *Ta'rikh Bāb al-abwāb*, relating to the history of Derbent. Between AD 987 and 989, Emir Maymun ibn Aḥmad, the ruler of Derbent, was said to have pagan Rus' *ghilmān* (sing. *ghulām*) in his service (Minorsky 1958: 45–6). In AD 987, the Rus' had been invited to Derbent as paid allies, but out of an expected 18 ships, they only sent one to investigate whether the emir's intentions were sincere. For unknown reasons the crew of the ship was massacred upon arrival by subjects of the Emir, and in revenge the other Rus' plundered the countryside. Two years later, however, Rus' *ghilmān* were found in the Emir's service. Although other Islamic rivals called for the Emir to convert them to Islam, he is said to have remained reluctant (Minorsky 1958: 45).

The question is whether these Rus' *ghilmān* should be seen as 'slave soldiers' rather than mercenaries (Sourdel et al. 1991: 1082–3). Although the practice of using 'slave soldiers' was one of the hallmarks of early Muslim military history, the term *ghulām* also had multiple other semantic uses, and sometimes incorporates other, related meanings, such as 'apprentice', 'youth' and 'personal servant' (Forand 1971: esp. 62; Pipes 1981: 195; Sourdel et al. 1991: 1079; Montgomery 2014: 262, n. 8). It could also refer to members of any armed retinue (even Byzantines for instance) (Golden 2004: 283–9), which suggests that the institution of military slavery was an Islamic adoption of the Eurasian *comitatus* system, perhaps implying that the 'slave' status was not so relevant (most notably: Beckwith 1984). However, the persistence of military slavery in Islamic culture contradicts this, implying that it was a unique cultural institution with a special connotation regarding the 'slave' status, which in certain cases was relativised (Gordon 2001: 1–2, 17–23, 156; Amitai 2006).

From an Islamic perspective, the expectations of the Derbent Rus' to receive payment would not have made any difference in this respect, since 'slave soldiers' (including *ghilmān*)

could reach high-ranking social positions, and obtain riches in spite of their supposed lowly origins. In principle, the Rus *ghilmān* that were found in Emir Maymun ibn Aḥmad's service in AD 989 could simply have been captured enemy soldiers – possibly from the conflict two years earlier – considered as 'slave soldiers' by their new Muslim masters.

Such liminal barriers – distinguishing between mercenaries and 'slave soldiers', or free and unfree – that these warrior groups had to cross represent a scholarly dilemma aptly illustrated by Montgomery's views on the Rus' that Ibn Faḍlān encountered on his journeys. Montgomery argues that they had identical backgrounds to those Rus' described by Mas'ūdī – i. e. that they came from Khazaria – although Montgomery is hesitant whether to label them as mercenaries, or as Mas'ūdī describes them, 'slave soldiers' (Montgomery 2010: 163). Others have also described *ghilmān* as a liminal phenomenon with a status somewhere in-between free and unfree (Patterson 1982: 308–14). Several examples are found in Ibn Faḍlān, who refers to various groups as *ghilmān*: his personal servants; the Rus' chieftain's afterlife retainers; even the Khazar Khagan's Muslim commander (Montgomery 2014: 194, 248, 256). I cannot find any comparative support for how to define any of these ambiguous slave categories, which leads to the question of the actual difference between exceptional *ghilmān* of corroborated slave status, owning slaves of their own, and the 400 retainers of the Rus' king mentioned earlier, who each had two female slaves.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information regarding the status, conditions, and loyalty of Rus' 'slave soldiers' and mercenaries. A comparison with warrior groups other than the Rus' may perhaps improve our understanding. It remains unclear whether captive enemy soldiers, forced into military service by their victors, retained their subjugated status until they died, or if they were able, and allowed to improve their social status. Emperor Nikephoros, for instance, made his captured Magyar warriors dress according to Byzantine fashion, in *vestibus ornatos* ('valuable vestments', Becker 1915: 199), which may suggest a more trusted position than that enjoyed by the Rus' soldiers in Itil, mentioned above. It is unlikely that the Rus' in Itil – and other possible nomadic settings – were paid, since Mas'ūdī states that the Khazar Khagan was the only one who could afford a mercenary force in the East, and that monetary compensation only benefitted his Khazar bodyguards, and possibly his Muslim soldiers (Lunde and Stone 2012: 133, 155; Montgomery 2014: 256–7). Another mid-10th-century Muslim author, al-Istakhrī, noted that the Khazar retinue '[...] are not paid regularly, but are given small amounts at long intervals' (Lunde and Stone 2012: 154). This is consistent with a general practice among eastern nomadic warrior groups during the medieval period, who did not receive regular payment (Sinor 1997: 135). Another source that strengthens the suggestions that the Khazar Khagan did not pay his Rus' warriors is Ibn Rusta, who does not mention any other troops than the Khazar cavalry, which was sponsored by the realm (Lunde and Stone 2012: 117). Despite not getting paid and their low social status, the Rus' still retained some rights, e.g. in Khazaria, where they were judged by pagan law (Lunde and Stone 2012: 133), or in Derbent, where the emir allowed them to remain pagan.

Scandinavian accounts provide additional comparisons. It has been suggested that Scandinavian retainers, by pledging oaths to lords (such as the word Varangian implies), accepted that their new masters took control over their lives (Brink 2008: 54). Although such developments were contemporary with the emergence of historical concepts of honour – where receiving a respected place in a ruler's *hirō* was considered a high reward – these acts also resulted in the loss of legal rights and possibilities (Karras 1988: 44; Iversen 1997:

24–6; Brink 2012: 152–4, 162–7). What is clear is that patron-client relationships always implied some form of servitude, one which could vary from being mutually beneficial to something akin to slavery.

The reduced rights of retinue members are reflected in accounts in the Icelandic sagas, where rulers gift retinue members to other rulers, without the retainers having a say in the matter. In two (related) 13th-century sagas, the *Orkneyinga saga* and *Magnússona saga*, Scandinavian warships and their crews are left behind in Constantinople by their masters, to serve the Byzantine Emperor. The first is related to Earl Rögnvaldr's visit to the Holy Land in 1151, when he left *Eiðrīdi Ungi* behind with six ships in the Byzantine capital for a few years (Guðmundsson 1965: 221, 236). The same had been done in 1110 by *Sigurðr Jörðsalafari*, who left his ships and crews in Alexios I Komnenos' service before returning to Norway (Aðalbjarnarson 2002 c: 253–4). Although these accounts do not contain references to 'slavery', the status of the retainers after having been 'given away' may be comparable to the diminished rights of 'slave soldiers'. Whether this post-Viking Age practice can be applied to earlier time periods needs further scrutiny, as does the question of whether these accounts describe an exclusively lordly custom, or if it occurred among lesser rulers as well. In the Icelandic *Eyrbyggja saga*, Halli and Leiknir, two retainers of outstanding physical abilities but with difficult tempers, are complaining about having been 'given away like slaves' (ON: *selja [...] gefa sem ánaudga men*) from the Icelandic chieftain *Vermundr* to another chieftain called *Styrr* (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935: 64). Previously, the two had been gifted by King *Eiríkr* of Sweden to the Norwegian earl *Hákon*, and later by the same earl to *Vermundr* (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935: 61–3). In the vocabulary of the Old Norse Icelandic family and kings' sagas, some definitions associated to slaves are explicitly linked to the king's household and *hirð*, and slaves were sometimes allowed to possess arms, and participate in conflicts (Karras 1988: 44, 114, 123; Iversen 1997: 149–53). Such accounts may of course not be directly transferable to the customs of the retinues of Scandinavian/Rus' leaders in the East. Despite such reservations, it is not improbable that these customs existed in both places, especially when considering other social and political similarities during the Viking Age (Melnikova 2011).

What the implications were of being a Scandinavian or Rus' 'slave soldier' in the East is difficult to establish. It may simply have meant entering into military service, sometimes through captivity. However, it seems that starting as a captive – as I have suggested above – did not exclude advancement, or becoming a trusted member of a retinue. It did probably not exclude the opposite either, that a retainer – freely, or forced to – surrendered parts of his privileges without ever being a captive. However, their new living conditions, their chance of social promotion or risk of demotion have to be examined from two perspectives: that of the soldiers, and that of the masters, which may not coincide. In addition, the differences between free and unfree, becomes even more blurred when they are compared cross-culturally. An interesting question would be whether all observers perceived the Rus' *ghilmān* in the same way? Is it not possible that they themselves saw their role as mercenaries, and that Muslim officials, their masters, and the rest of the societies where they served, saw them as slaves? Or did such soldiers, similar to Halli and Leiknir, perceive themselves as slaves because of the poor way they were treated, while wider society saw them as free? Did Ibn Faḍlān have different opinions about the *ghilmān*, who he claimed served a Rus' chieftain as slaves in the afterlife, and the secondary accounts he repeats about the sacrificed

free retainers of the Rus' king? How was the latter form of servitude comparable to the Islamic 'slave soldiers' he may already have known from own experience? Without doubt, Scandinavians and Rus' encountered a variety of cultures in the East, each expressing different and variable attitudes towards captives and slaves.

Conclusion

The sources discussed in this article illustrate that although Scandinavians and Rus' were generally regarded as formidable adversaries, they also met tough opposition from their Byzantine, nomadic and Muslim counterparts. Thus – regardless of social position – they were also subject to captivity. How widespread this phenomenon was during the Viking Age is difficult to assess but, judging from the proviso of the AD 912 Rus'-Byzantine treaty discussed above, captive Rus' may have been more frequent in various areas of the East than has generally been assumed. My research highlights that Scandinavians and Rus' were not immune to the perils of other inhabitants in these regions, and accordingly the Rus' were sometimes defeated by communities with well-developed – sometimes superior – military structures and technologies.

The accounts also suggest that Rus' captives were not immediately executed, tortured, or forced into manual slave labour, but that they could also be recruited, or forced into military service. There does not seem to have been one single fate for the 'slave soldiers' in the East but a variety, depending on such things as: lodgings, provisions, equipment, pay, and concepts of trust and honour. In contrast, other types of military servitude also lead to diminished possibilities, infringed rights, and poor treatment. Whether these warriors were regarded as free or unfree depended on social and legal factors, resulting from a variety of perspectives, not necessarily shared by masters, followers, or observers, due to their distinctive cultural backgrounds.

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