

Ahmad ibn-Fadlan: Letters On the Vikings

(NOTE: Ibn Fadlan was employed by the 'Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad when he was accused of an illicit love affair that would ruin his reputation and his career. He agreed to leave town on a mission to open diplomacy with the Bulgars, as a way of getting out of the public eye, and out of possible scandal. En route to the Bulgars he fell in with a group of Viking marauders. Here he describes them in a letter.

The Northmen

They are the filthiest race that God ever created. They do not wipe themselves after a stool, nor wash themselves thereafter, any more than if they were wild asses.

They come from their country in the North, anchor their ships in the Volga River, and build large wooden houses on its banks. In every such house there live ten or twenty, more or less. Each man has a couch, where he sits with the beautiful girls he has for sale. Here he is as likely as not to enjoy one of them while a friend looks on. At times several of them will be thus engaged, each in full view of the others. Now and then a merchant will come to a house to purchase a girl, and find her master thus embracing her, and not giving over until he has full had his will.

Every morning a girl comes and brings a tub of water, and places it before her master. In this he proceeds to wash his face and hands, and then his hair, combing it out over the vessel. Thereupon he blows his nose, and spits into the tub, and leaving no dirt behind, conveys it all into this water. When he has finished, the girl carries the tub to the man next to him, who does the same. Thus she continues carrying the tub from one to another until each man has blown his nose and spit into the tub, and washed his face and hair.

A Viking Funeral

I was told that when their chiefs die, they consume them with fire. When I heard that one of their leaders had died, I wanted to see this myself. First they laid him in his grave, over which a roof was erected, for the space of ten days, until they had completed cutting and sowing his funeral clothes.

At the death of a rich man, they bring together his goods, and divide them into three parts. The first of these is for his family. The second is expended for the garments they make. And with the third they purchase strong drink, for the day when the girl resigns herself to death, and will be burned with her master.

When one of their chiefs dies, his family asks his girls and pages, "Which one of you will die with him?" One will answer: "I." From the moment he utters this word, he may not go back. Mostly, though, it is one of the girls who volunteers.

Regarding the man of whom I spoke, one girl answered "I will." She was then entrusted to two other girls, who kept watch over her and accompanied her everywhere she went. The people were preparing the dead man's funeral clothes, and this girl gave herself over to drinking and singing, and was cheerful and gay.

When the day had come that the dead man and the girl were to be committed to the flames, I went to the river where his ship lay, but found it had already been drawn ashore. The dead man lay at a distance in his grave, from which they had not yet removed him. Next they brought a couch, placed it in the ship, and covered it with Greek cloth of gold, wadded and quilted, with pillows of the same material. An woman, whom they call the "Angel of Death," came and spread articles on the couch. It was she who was to slay the girl.

They drew the dead man out of the grave and clothed him. They carried him into the ship, seated him on the quilted covering, supported him with the pillows, and brought strong drinks, fruits, and herbs to place beside him. Finally they brought a cock and hen, slew them, and threw them in, too.

The girl meanwhile walked to and fro, entering one after another of the tents which they had there. The occupant of each tent lay with her, saying, "Tell your master I did this only for love of you."

It was now Friday afternoon, and they led the girl to an object they had constructed which looked like a door-frame. They lifted her and lowered her several times. Then they handed her a hen, whose head they had cut off. They gave her strong drink and admonished her to drink it quickly. After this, the girl seemed dazed. At this moment the men began to beat upon their shields, in order to drown out the noise of her cries, which might deter other girls from seeking death with their masters in the future.

They laid her down and seized her hands and feet. The old woman known as the Angel of Death knotted a rope around her neck and handed the ends to two men to pull. Then with a broad dagger she stabbed her between the ribs while the men strangled her. Thus she died.

The family of the dead men drew near, and taking a piece of wood, lit the ship. The ship was soon aflame, as was the couch, the man, the girl, and everything in it.

At my side one of the Northmen was talking with my interpreter. After their conversation I asked my interpreter what he had said. The Northman had said:

"You Arabs are stupid! You would take him who is the most revered and beloved among men, and cast him into the ground, to be devoured by creeping things and worms. We, on the other hand, burn him in a twinkling, so that he instantly, without a moment's delay, enters into Paradise."