



Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture

Доклады Второго Международного Симпозиума

**ИСЛАМСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА
В ВОЛГО-УРАЛЬСКОМ РЕГИОНЕ**



Proceedings of the Second International Symposium on

**ISLAMIC CIVILISATION
IN VOLGA-URAL REGION**



**VOLGA-URAL BÖLGESİNDE
İSLAM MEDENİYETİ**

II. Milletlerarası Sempozyumu Tebliğleri

İstanbul 2008

**Volga-Ural Region in the 10th Century A.D:
A Study of the Emergence of Islam, Social Milieu, Trade Activities and Relations
with the Abbasid Caliphate**

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Introducing Volga-Ural Region: A Historical View

Russia is a multinational country where Muslims number more than twenty million persons. This country possesses strong traditions related to the joint residence of two great faiths - Christianity and Islam. Islam appeared in the territory of Russia about fourteen hundred years ago. On the banks of Volga river, it appeared towards the middle of the ninth century. Ibn Rusta reports (between 903-907) that the king of Bulghar and his family and courtiers were Muslims. He also mentions the existence of mosques, madrasas, *mullahs* and *muazzins* in the townships and villages of the region. But the year 922 A.D. is commonly accepted as the date of the official arrival of Islam on the banks of the middle Volga when the embassy of the Baghdad Caliph arrived in the capital of the state of Bulghar.¹ Simultaneously this event became the act of the

¹ The embassy of caliph al-Muqtadir Billah was sent to the Bulghar king Almash bin Yaltwar as a result of the latter's written request in which he had invoked the military support as well as technical and financial help against the Khazar king who would often violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bulghar kingdom. (for more details see the author's article "Description of Some Central Asian Tribes in Ibn Fadlan's 10th Century Account of the Bulghar, Ghuzz, Peceneg and Bashgard Turks of Volga-Ural Region" in *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, University of Kashmir, Vol. 2000, pp.32. ff.) The Bulghar chief had also requested for religio-spiritual patronage from the Caliph to help in the spread of Islam in the Bulghar kingdom.

Ibn Fadlan, *Safar nama*, tr. Tabatabai (hereafter *Safar nama*), Iran, 1436, p. 57.

The Bulghar king desired to construct the mosques and pulpits in his territory in order to seek blessings from the pulpits for the Caliph besides offering prayers in these. He also requested the Caliph for despatching to Bulghar kingdom expert religious scholars who would preach and teach the Bulghar people the tenets of Islam.

Safar nama, pp. 20, 57, 98.

The Caliphal embassy consisted of four members:

Ibn Fadlan (head of the mission and a scholar of Arabic language and religious sciences), Susan al-Rassi (the *hajib* of Caliph al-Muktafi), Takeen Turki and Baris Saqlabi (a slave of the governor of Khurasan who also functioned as the translator. It has been established that the slaves or Saqaliba

international recognition of the Volga-Bulgharia as an independent state. In this way the Tatars joined at an early date the most advanced civilization of that time - Islam. Acceptance of Islam gave a push to rapid development of education, culture, science and society as a whole. Growth of cities began on the Kama and the Volga. These factors greatly improved the trade relations of Volga-Bulgharia with the rest of the Islamic world and the former was considered one of the first Turkic states having all the components and the potential of a highly developed urban cultura. The Bulghar state became one of the most influential in eastern Europe. The formation of the Mongolian empire, and then the Golden Horde, did not change the position of Islam in the Volga region. According to the "yassa" (code of laws) of Chengis Khan, all religions were admitted as equal, exempted from taxes, and oppression of any existing church and the clergy was considered a crime subject to punishment. Therefore, both Islam and Christianity developed freely in the Golden Horde era. Even when, in the year 1312 the Uzbek Khan declared Islam as the state religion, it did not touch the Russian princedoms that remained orthodox. Already in the middle ages, tolerance was implanted in the culture of the Tatars and it found continuity in the next centuries.

Interestingly, in the history of Tatars, Islam played and plays a more important role than it was officially admitted. It influenced and still influences peoples' faiths in the country, the ethnic, cultural and social processes, inter-ethnic and ideological affairs, economic and political developments relating to the international position and international affairs of Russia. There are nine Muslim republics in the Russian federation. The Volga-Ural region is one of the largest cluster of Muslims. It represents a historical miracle resulting from the complex interaction of Russia with the Muslim world. According to the population census 1979, 6.3 million Soviet citizens recorded their nationality as 'Tatar', making them the third largest Turkic group and the sixth in the rank order of Soviet nationalities.

servants functioned as translators for the Rus merchants who came to Baghdad), see: P.B. Golden, art. "Rus" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol VIII, Leiden, 1995, pp. 621, 23.

Ibn Fadlan's great contribution, among other things is that he has produced an interesting account, based on his personal experiences, of some prominent social groups and tribes that he came across en route to the kingdom of Bulghars. Besides discussing the tribes of Ghuzz, Bashgard and Peceneg he has also given a detailed account of the peoples of Rus and Khazar. The account (*Safar nama*) of Ibn Fadlan is the only written document available about the past history of the societies of Volga-Ural region which became, in later centuries, the hub of the culture in eastern Europe.

The Bulghar Muslim kingdom lasted up to 1491 whence their last ruler Abdullah was killed by Timur. In spite of the military subjugation of Bulghar Muslims by the Mongols, the former continued to exercise triumphant influences upon the latter. The spectacular and most remarkable instance of this phenomenon is that Bulghar Muslims were the first to have impressed and attracted the Mongols for embracing Islam.

We have elsewhere² discussed the society and culture of the peoples and prominent tribes of the Volga-Ural region as reflected in the *Safar nama* (10th century travel account) of Ibn Fadlan. With a view to benefit from this only available written information about the region and to highlight the past/history of this less known region of eastern Europe which, in the later centuries became the hub of culture and civilization in Russia and that is commonly called as the 'greater Bulghar' by western historians, we have attempted, in this paper, to see the society and trade activities of the remaining two culture groups of the Volga-Ural region — the Rus and the Khazar.

Regional Trade of Rus and Bulghar: Attitudes and Commodities

The Rus³ seem to have been a dominant trading community in the Volga-Ural region during the period under review. One of the earliest notices about the trading activities of Rus is found in Ibn Khurradadhbih, writing around the year 272/885-6, on the "route of the Rus merchants" who brought goods from northern Europe/ North-western Russia to Baghdad. A hoard of coins found at Peterhof, near St. Petersburg, contains twenty coins (Sasanid), Arabo-Sasanid and Arab dirhams, the latest dated to 189/804-5) with graffitti in Arabic. This may be taken as an evidence for the existence of the trade of Rus with the Muslim lands as described by Ibn Khurradadhbih.⁴

² See the author's article "Description of some Central Asian Tribes in Ibn Fadlan's 10th Century Account of the Bulghar, Ghuzz, Peceneg and Bashgard Turks of Volga-Ural Region," *op.cit.*, pp.31 ff.

³ The land was occasionally called *Rusiya* by the Arabic authors. This was the designation of a people and land from which modern Russia, Ukraine and Belarus derive. There have been two centuries of occasionally heated discussion, about the origin of Rus, between the "Normanists" (those favouring a Scandinavian origin of the Rus and by extension the Rus state) and their opponents, the "anti-Normanists" (For more details see: P.B. Golden, *op.cit.*, pp. 621 ff.

⁴ For more details see: T. Noonan, "When did Rus Merchants first visit Khazaria and Baghdad" in A.R. Hands (eds.) Oxford, 1981, pp. 47 ff.

Our sources indicate that the Rus merchants transported beaver hides, the pelts of the black fox and swords from the farthest reaches of the Saqaliba⁵ to the sea of Rum. Ibn Hawqal too mentions that the honey, wax and beaver furs brought to the Islamic world from Khazaria actually come from the region around Rus and Bulghar, Rus and Kiyaba.⁶

The initial picture that comes to be known of Rus is that of mobile, urban-based traders who sometimes resorted to the activity of raiding.⁷ Ibn Rusta reports that the Rus did not possess any real estate property or cultivated lands. They capture the Saqaliba by force and “take their foodstuffs since they had no cultivated lands of their own.” Rather than engaging in agrarian pursuits, their profession is trade in sable, grey squirrel and other such furs which they sell to purchasers. “They take the value of goods in gold and fasten it to their belts.” The importance of this region for trade with the Islamic world would appear to be supported by considerable numismatic evidence. The volume of this trade seems to have exceeded that of their commercial relations with Byzantium. Ibn Fadlan gives direct evidence of goods being exchanged for Islamic coins.⁸

The Rus merchants are also reported to have travelled from Novagorod to Kiev and then down the Dnipper and into the Black Sea to trade with Constantinople. “The ruler of Rum takes a tithe from them. If they wish, they go to the river of

⁵ The term *Saqaliba* while often used to designate the slavs, was also employed to denote the whole of the fair-haired, ruddy-complexioned population of central, eastern and northeastern Europe. Ibn Fadlan who journeyed to Volga-Bulgharia in 309-10/921-22 (the subject population of which included, in addition to various Turkic groups, Finno-Ugrian and other northern peoples), termed the Bulghar ruler as “king of the *Saqaliba*”. *Saqaliba* were more acquainted with the Muslims especially with those who traded in their lands. From the historical accounts it becomes clear that *Saqaliba* also performed the function of trade agents, guides of the Arab trading caravans and their translators. It has often been assumed that it was the *Saqaliba* servants who functioned as translators for the Rus merchants who came to Baghdad. However, Ibn Fadlan, throughout his account has described the “slavs” as “*Saqaliba*”.

⁶ Ibn Hawqal and al-Istakhri have noted three subdivisions of Rus, each based on an urban centre. Kiev or Kiyaba was one among them. This is the southern most of Rus lands. It was also the residence of the king of Rus (Golden, *op. cit.*, p. 622.).

⁷ The Rus, it may be concluded, at least in the early stage of their history were largely merchant middle men and on occasions pirates. They produced nothing of their own, but raided, extorted/collected tribute or traded for furs and other commodities of the northern forest zone which they then brought to the Mediterranean or the Islamo-central Asian world either directly or through yet other middlemen into Volga Bulgharia or Khazaria (Golden, *op.cit.*, p. 624).

⁸ Islamic dirhams first began to surface in what became Russia and the Baltic region, in ca, 800 (Ibid).

Saqaliba. They also travel to Khamlidj, the city of Khazars whose ruler takes a tithe from them. Then they betake themselves to the sea of Jurjan and they alight on whichever of its shores they wish. Sometimes, they carry their goods from Jurjan by camels to Baghdad.⁹ After their arrival at the sea of Rum (most probably the Black sea is meant here) and their payment of the tithe, they go to "Samarkash of the Jews". "They then turn towards *Saqaliba*¹⁰ or they betake themselves from the sea of *Saqaliba* by this river, which is called the river of *Saqaliba*, until they come to Khamlikh. Ultimately, their goods may go as far as Rayy."¹¹ Al-Idrisi gives the names of a large number of cities in 'Rusiyya' and its immediate environs that were involved in brisk trade: Lubasha (Lyubec), Zaka (Sakov), Sklahi, Ghalisiyya (Galicia, Halic), Snubli, Turubi (Turov), Barazlaw (Pereyaslavl), Qnw (Kanew), Iski, Mulsa, Kaw, Brzula, Usiyya, Brasansa, Ludjgha, Arn, Mrturi, at the mouth of the river Danast/Dnestr.¹²

In the beginning of his account about Rus, Ibn Fadlan discusses their commercial activities across the river Atul. During their sojourn to river Atul to export their goods to the neighbouring cities, the Rus merchants lived in (probably hired) boats. The cross points on the river offered brisk market activity and contained *Caravan Sarais* (inns) to accommodate the traders and their retinue. The *Sarais* had spacious halls accommodating more than thirty people.¹³

On their arrival with goods at river Volga they paid respect to a giant manlike statue, which stood amidst other smaller statues, by offering before him things like meat, onions and wine.¹⁴

Prostrated before the big statue one murmured, "Oh Lord! I have come from a distant city (naming the slave girls and goods he had brought with him for trade) I pray for a trader with sufficient money and riches who agrees to my terms and conditions." In case the trader failed to get what he implored for, he laid on alter the same offerings twice or thrice in front of the other smaller statues,

⁹ Golden, *op.cit.*, p. 619-621.

¹⁰ Golden *op.cit.*, p.621.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 622.

¹² River Volga.

¹³ *Safar nama*, p. 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.103.

considering them as his (big statute's) wives, daughters and sons and prostrated before them seeking their blessings.¹⁵

If the benedictions were fulfilled, the trader slaughtered a few sheep or cows as a gesture of thankfulness. Part of the flesh of slaughtered animals was distributed as alms among the fellow traders and the rest was again offered in front of the deities. The skulls of these sheep and cows were hanged at the top of a wooden log that was erected in the vicinity.¹⁶

Ibn Fadlan says that a typical instance of the hallucination of the Rus is reflected by what they thought acceptance of their sacrifices by dieties though the sacrifices (skulls) were only devoured by dogs during the night.¹⁷

The brisk activity of exporting their commodities to the outside world has been reported by almost all historians. Ibn Fadlan, too, has devoted a good portion of his account to the description of the commercial activities of the Rus but he has not, explicitly, mentioned the commodities of their trade except slave-girls and furs. However, al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal have mentioned black sable, black fox, beaver pelts, lead and mercury as the trade goods of Rus. They are also reported to have exported very valuable blades and swords which can be bent in two, but as soon as the hand is removed they return to their former state. Ibn Hawqal further comments that the honey wax and beaver furs brought to the Islamic world from Khazaria actually came from the region around Rus and Bulghar. Indeed, some of the prized fur animals are only found in the northern rivers which are near Bulghar and Rus.¹⁸

In addition to these commodities the Rus mostly busied themselves in slave trade. All the contemporary historians have mentioned the prized quality of the slaves from Khazar kingdom and Bulghar. Ibn Khuradadbi and Ibn al Faqih mention that the Bulghar lands were the main centres that produced slaves and the two major companies involved in this trade on an international level were Raddaniyya and Rus.¹⁹ All the Arabic geographical literature points out the fact

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Golden, p. 622.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

that the Rus merchants were the main suppliers of slaves entering the Islamic world and that the Rus were deeply involved in this trade.²⁰

Ibn Fadlan says that the Rus carried along with them a good number of good looking slave girls and sent them off to the slave markets of Khazar and Bulghar where from they were forwarded to Islamic lands. But Ibn Fadlan is shocked to report the immodest act of these merchants who engaged themselves in sexual intercourse with their slave girls while their friends looked on.²¹

Milieu of Rus

Ibn Fadlan describes Rus as a people blooming with youthful vigour, reddish complexion, robust health and reasonable height the match of which he has never seen. He identifies them so far as their height is concerned, with a datepalm.²²

Ibn Rusta describes the Rus as possessed of "long bodies, a (good) visage and fearlessness". Again Gardizi and Ibn Rusta (both) stress their personal neatness; some are clean-shaven, others braid or plait their beard. Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal attribute this personal fastidiousness to their mercantile pursuits. Gardizi says that their clothing is made of linen and they wear bracelets of gold. Ibn Rusta says that their trousers are made out of 100 cubits of (cotton) fabric, which they gather in at the knee and fasten there. They also wear "woolen bonnets with tails let down behind their necks." Istakhiri and Ibn Hawqal report that they wear short coats.²³ But Ibn Fadlan says that they do not wear short coats or caftans but a *kisa* (cloak). He further says that each of the Rus individuals carries an axe, a sword and a knife from which they never parted.²⁴ Their women are bedecked with various gold and silver ornaments in display of ostentation commensurate with their husband's wealth. On obtaining the wealth amounting to ten thousands dirhams, the husband was supposed to offer one necklace to his wife and so on.²⁵

To this failing were added in ordinate suspicion and covetousness as reported by Ibn Rusta and Gardizi. In this regard they say that the Rus went out to perform

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Safar nama*, p.102

²² *Ibid.* p.102.

²³ Golden, p. 624

²⁴ *Safar nama*, p.101

²⁵ *Ibid.*

their natural call only when accompanied by several friends to stand guard. Otherwise, a man on his own would be killed. So great is their distrust and perfidity that if one acquires even a little wealth "his brothers and friends who are with him crave it, try to kill him and dispossess him of it." Possessing of arms and carrying the same with them round the clock, as reported by Ibn Fadlan, also points towards the menace of individual security in which the Rus permanently found themselves.

But the travellers' reports about the so-called perfidious and distrustful nature of the Rus seem to be exaggerated. It is difficult to believe that in presence of such distrust and perfidy the Rus could have been as affective a commercial and military force as they were.²⁶

Customs and Taboos

Ibn Rusta and Gardizi report about the Rus that "when a baby boy is born to one of them he sets before the baby a drawn sword and places it between his hands and says to him "I leave you no goods as inheritance. You have nothing except what you may acquire for yourself by this, your sword."²⁷ It is also reported that the daughter receives her father's inheritance, while the son is given a sword and told, "your father acquired the wealth by sword, imitate and follow him."²⁸ The same sense of rugged individualism was reflected by their treatment of the ill. Ibn Fadlan reports something that reflects the failure of the Rus to fulfill the social responsibility of caring for or looking after the sick and ailing persons of the society. It appears that they had no idea of medical care and were devoid of all knowledge and information pertaining to medicine. "They, desperately and uncompassionately bring out the sick member of their family from the home and erect a tent for him, in a secluded place quite away from them and cast him away there. Having deserted the patient in the tent some quantity of bread and water is placed with him and throughout the period of ailment they neither visit him nor show any kind of acquaintance with him. They are more apathetic towards the patient in case he or she is an aged or a frail and weak person."²⁹

²⁶ Golden, p. 624.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Safar nama*, p. 104.

Without mentioning the religion of Rus, Ibn Fadlan says that "they burn their dead or in case of a weak and frail person leave him to the mercy of dogs and birds of prey who consumed his flesh".³⁰

The Rus were very strict in dealing with the criminals. It is probably due to their harsh dealing with criminals that they seldom committed crimes. Ibn Fadlan hardly makes mention of any criminal activities among the Rus. Even the classical crimes of loot and plunder among the Rus are less often reported by Ibn Fadlan "transgressors are dealt with harshly, thieves are hung by the neck from stout trees and then left to rot in wind and rain."³¹

The Rus did not possess any fixed burial customs. Sometimes they burnt their dead while as on occasions they buried them. If the deceased was a poor fellow, he was burnt in a small tent that was erected for this purpose. Although in case of the death of an opulent person or a chief their burial customs were remarkably different and striking. Ibn Fadlan provides us with one of the most extraordinary detailed depictions of the funeral of a Rus chief, which he himself seems to have witnessed. In this case the heritage of the deceased is divided into three parts. One third of it is given to his offspring, an equal of the same is spent on the preparation of his obsequies and the rest is spent on the preparation of intoxicating drinks and wines to be enjoyed on the day when one of the slave-girls of the deceased would sacrifice herself along with her master.³²

It was customary among the Rus that on the death of a chief or a rich person his male and female slaves were asked to volunteer for sacrificing their lives along with their master. In most cases one of the slave-girls opted for the sacrifice.³³

The moment she confided her willingness to die with her master, as a token of respect and gratitude for him, she was fully protected but at the same time watched at carefully so that she may not change her mind that was henceforth impossible for her to do. Ibn Fadlan says, "she is looked at with respect and compassion. She is escorted by two maids who look after her and take care of her daily needs. "They wash her clothes, keep her neat and clean and wash her feet with their own hands. She is treated like a bride." "The two maids accompany her wherever she goes and live together with her. They keep a strict

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* p. 105.

³³ *Ibid.*

vigil on her lest she tries to escape or changes her mind about the sacrifice", reports Ibn Fadlan.³⁴

He further says that she was allowed to enjoy fully the drinking, dancing and singing.³⁵

On the day that was fixed for the sacrifice of the slave girl, the dead body of the deceased was brought out from the grave in which it lie buried for ten days and was enveloped in *diba-i-rumi* (the precious cloth made in Rome). The fruits, wine and a musical instrument, which was earlier buried along with him, too was brought out of the grave. The dead body that was well preserved because of the cold weather was laid down on a cot made of *chub-i-tabriz* (wood from Tabriz). The cot was placed in a small tent. Then came an aged woman called by them the "angel of death" who again wrapped the corpse in the same precious cloth. The corps was now dressed with a gown, a shirt and a waist-coat designed and decorated with cut work of gold. A fur hat was put on the head of the dead body. After dressing the dead body in newly designed costumes, it was shifted on a plank (covered with costly sheets) and seated against pillows - drinks, fruits and incense kept in front of the dead body. Thereafter one dog and two cows were slaughtered and the pieces of their flesh were scattered inside the tent. Amidst these celebrations the slave-girl, who was likely to sacrifice herself, entered the tents of the male member and relatives of the deceased who entered, one after the other, into sexual intercourse with her. Having done this (immodest) act each person said to her, "Tell your master that I did it as a token of my tribute and love for him." She was given copious amounts of wine so that she became dull witted. The men outside the tent began to strike their shields with wooden sticks in order to drown her cries as she was strangled to death.³⁶

A close relative of the deceased chief set fire to the wooden plank on which the strangled slave-girl was made to rest beside her dead master. In reply to Ibn Fadlan's queries about the whole (inhuman and uncouth) episode, one of the Rus replied describing "the 'burying of the dead' by the Arabs (Muslims) as an extremely unkind act for, they (the Arabs) allow the flesh of dear and near ones to be eaten by insects and worms whereas 'cremating of the dead' was an act of decency which made the sojourn of near and dear ones to heaven very comfortable and swift in these words, "you Arabs are stupid, you take the most

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.107.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

loved and distinguished among you and dump them in the earth. The earth consumes them (as do also) insects and worms. But we cremate them in fire, in the flick of an eye and he enters the paradise immediately."³⁷

Ibn Fadlan says that a small burial mound was then set up at the site in which the coṭ was burnt. A large piece of Tabrizi wood was placed on the spot and the name of deceased chief was written on it as well as that of the king of the Rus.³⁸

The Government

Among the contemporary Muslim geographers and travellers only Ibn Fadlan gives a detailed description of the Rus ruler. But he does not mention in clear terms whether the ruler was the *Kaghan*. He merely refers to him as the king. According to Ibn Fadlan, "The king is held in high esteem by his subjects. He resides in a castle, surrounded by his retinue of four hundred select warriors who live and die with him. Each warrior has two slave-girls. One looks after him, washes his head and clothes and prepares his eatables while as the other one shares his bed. The king sits on a magnificent and jewel encrusted throne along with forty slave-girls, with whom he sometimes has public sexual intercourse. The king does not normally step down from the throne, even for the performance of natural functions."

"If he leaves the throne, his feet are not permitted to touch the ground. A horse is fetched up to the throne and he mounts upon it from there. He has a deputy who commands the armies, invades into the enemy's territory and represents the king before his subjects."³⁹

Khazars

Ibn Fadlan, interestingly discusses only the status of Khazar king and the position of his *harem* ignoring every other detail about the Khazar society, "The Khazar king" says Fadlan, "has a large city as his empire on the bank of river Volga. The kingdom is divided into two parts. One part is inhabited by the Muslims who run their affairs in accordance with their own legal and doctrinal systems. They have

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

their own law courts to decide the disputes if any. One resident representative of the Muslims is stationed at the court of Khazar king. The representative known as *Khuzz* is a Muslim by faith but happens to be a vassal of the Khazar king." As told by Ibn Fadlan the *Khuzz* determines the commercial activities and governs the trade affairs of the Muslim population of the Khazar kingdom. Nobody could enter into trade relations with the Muslims without his permission or vice-versa.⁴⁰

The Khazar king carried the title of *Khakan-i-Buzurg* (the great Khakan). Ibn Fadlan reports that the king is held in high esteem and possesses the regal grace and royal pomp. He is less often accessible to the common masses and does not perform the administrative duties himself. It is actually the *Khakan Bih* (small khakan), the lieutenant of the great Khakan who is the real administrator and executes the powers of the Khakan. He passes the decrees on behalf of the great Khakan, administers the empire and leads the army in the battlefield and manages their affairs. The *khakan bih* appears before the subjects unlike the great khakan who comes out (of his regal abode) only once in four months."⁴¹

Ibn Fadlan reports that the "small Khakan" visits the "great Khakan" daily, stands in front of him bare footed with a piece of firewood in his hand accompanied by two courtiers known as *Kundr khakan* and *Jaw shigar*.

On his death the king is buried in a spacious house that possesses twenty rooms. Nobody is able to identify the room in which the king's grave exists for, the man who buries the king is beheaded before he confides the identity of the grave to any one.⁴²

Each room is furnished with costliest fabric known as *zarbaft*. The grave of the king is plastered with cement so that the "devils, human beings and insects do not find their way into the grave". Khazars call the grave of their king as *bihisht* (the Heaven).⁴³

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

The Harem of the king

As reported by Ibn Fadlan the Khazars too were accustomed to slavery and concubinage like other Central Asian societies. Polygamy seems to have been common in that society. "The Khazar king has twenty five wives. Each of them is supposedly the daughter of one of the vassal rulers of neighbouring kingdoms, like Bulghar and Rus. These women are inducted into the king's harem both by choice as well as by force. In addition to twenty five wives the king also possesses a retinue of sixty slave-girls who too share the king's bed. Ibn Fadlan says that these slave girls are the "prettiest of all women".⁴⁴

The whole retinue of king's harem including the slave-girls live under the same roof. The king possess for himself one special and spacious tent covered with teak wood. Each woman of king's harem has a separate tent guarded by a servant who is always present outside the tent.

The Khazar king appears to have been keen, more than anything else, to fulfil his mundane desires of sexual lust. Ibn Fadlan reports that "the king fulfills his desire with any slave-girl of his choice at any time after which she is escorted back to her tent without being left free for a single moment."⁴⁵

As already discussed the Khazar king was held in high esteem by his subjects. Ibn Fadlan reports that whenever the King mounts his horse, he is followed by a large retinue of his soldiers who maintain a distance of one mile from the king. The King's subjects, on seeing him passing by, bow and prostrate till the King's caravan passes off.⁴⁶

The period of king's rule is only forty years. If he exceeds a single day to this period, he is beheaded by his relatives and courtiers considering him as "stupid and unwise" for being too aged and having ruled for forty long years.⁴⁷

Possessed with marshal spirit the Khazar king never accepts the hegemony of any of the neighbouring powers. The military valour was often demonstrated against the neighbours, sometimes without any provocation from the other side. The king always expected his soldiers to win the battle. Ibn Fadlan reports about the harsh treatment of the defeated soldiers at the hands of the king:

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

"All such soldiers, as surrender before the enemy's army or get defeated in the battle, are killed. And the punishment for the commanders of the defeated army is that in their presence their sons and daughters were distributed as slaves concubines respectively. The same is done to their movable and immovable assets, live stock and weapons.⁴⁸ In order to reprimand the others the defeated commanders are hanged to death and their bodies cut into two.⁴⁹

The king could also show his magnanimity and mercy by forgiving them.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 115.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.