

When and how did *the Rūs/Rhos* enter written sources?

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Ar-Rūs and *Rhos* appear to be variants, Arabic and Greek/Latin respectively, of a name that was employed in various sources from the ninth century onwards in order to denote a group of people that subsisted or made their presence felt in some way in a wide area from Central Europe to the Caspian Sea. This name has been an issue of long-standing scholarly debate known as the 'Normannist controversy' where sides have been taken in identifying it as Scandinavian or Slavic in origin (for a review of both arguments and a fresh approach see Pritsak 1981:xv-xviii, 3-7). In the following we shall abstain from adding more ruminations and uncertainties to the already vast literature dedicated to the problem of what entity, ethno-linguistic or otherwise labelled, the name *Rūs/Rhos* refers to. The aim of this paper is merely to establish a chronology of the earliest written instances of *the Rūs/Rhos* and to make a some observations about how these references convey their authors' perception of the movements of the peoples so termed.

***Annales Bertiniani* and Ibn Khurradādhbih**

The earliest reference to *the Rūs/Rhos* is usually thought to belong to the Frankish *Annals of St Bertin* for the year 839 where they are reported to arrive at the court of Louis the Pious at Ingelheim on the Rhine with an embassy from Byzantium.

[The Byzantine Emperor] Theophilus...also sent with the envoys [i.e. the Byzantine embassy] some men who said they...were called Russians [*Rhos*] and had been sent to him by their king whose name was the Khagan [*chacanus*]. Theophilus requested in his letter that the Emperor in his goodness might grant them safe conducts to travel through his empire and any help or practical assistance they needed to return home, for the route by which they had reached Constantinople had taken them through primitive tribes that were very fierce and savage and Theophilus did not wish them to return that way in case some disaster befell them. When the Emperor investigated more closely the reason for their coming here, he discovered that they belonged to the people of the Swedes. (Translation by Nelson 1991:134)

I shall return to the contents of this passage later but it is noteworthy that this Latin text has a form *Rhos* that is identical to the Greek version as attested by later Byzantine sources such as the sermons of patriarch Photios from around 860 and Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Administrando Imperio* from the mid-tenth century. Another intriguing element here is the identification of their king as what appears to be *Khagan*, although the interpretation of *chacanus* has been contested (for differing views see Garipzanov 2008 and Golden 1982). The fact that these *Rhos* journeyed from Constantinople with the embassy dispatched by the Emperor himself suggests that they were already known in Byzantium by 839. To this we may add the possibility of a *Rhos* attack on Paphlagonia on the southern coast of Asia Minor, documented in the *Life of St George of Amastris* and attributed by some scholars to the first half of the ninth century, while some have postulated that it is a later insertion (Obolensky 1970:150). It is perhaps surprising then that the earliest Greek text to mention the *Rhos* is the work of Photios that reports a *Rūs* attack on Constantinople in 860, which in this context is rather late (*The Homilies of Patriarch Photios of Constantinople, no. III and IV*). Considering that they formed a part of an embassy that was dispatched from there twenty years earlier, Photios' account cannot be held to represent the moment when the Byzantines were first acquainted with the *Rhos*.

Our main sources for the early evidence of the *Rūs/Rhos*, however, are neither Greek nor Latin texts. From the first half of the ninth century to the early tenth century we have several accounts of the *Rūs* in Arabic sources which are considerably more explicit and informative. In this context there are two works that have been dated prior to the mid-ninth century. The earliest Arabic text to mention the *Rūs* is generally regarded to have been written by Ibn Khurradādhbih, one of the pioneers among Muslim geographers. His work *Kitāb Al-Masālik wa -l-Mamālik* (*The Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms*) is dated to the 840s (ed. De Goeje 1967; Montgomery 2008:551.) Golden (1982), however, dates the notice on the *Rūs* to before 840. Summing up Ibn Khurradādhbih, he writes that the *Rūs* come from among the *Saqālibāh* (used by Ibn Khurradādhbih and later Arabic writers as a general term for the inhabitants of North-

eastern Europe). They sail down the river Don, pass through Khazaria and enter the Caspian Sea, sometimes landing their ships in Jurjān where they transport their merchandise on camel-back to Baghdad. According to Ibn Khurradādhbih the Rus claim to be Christian and pay customs accordingly and that *Saqālibāh* eunuchs are used as their interpreters (*K. al-Masālik wa -l-Mamālik*:154-5).

These observations give an overall impression that the presence of the *Rūs* was felt in the region north of the Caucasus and around the Caspian; furthermore they were reported to have been on sufficiently good terms with the Khazars, who reigned supreme in this region, to be able to use the Volga river. Arabic authors write this kind of information repeatedly about the *Rūs* throughout the ninth and tenth centuries. Such geographical proximity to the Islamic Caliphate, and not least the apparent close connections with the Khazars who were important foes and later trading partners of the former, would have allowed for plenty of occasions for the *Rūs* to enter the writings of Muslim geographers and historians in this period.

Al-Khwārizmī and the 'mountain of Rūs'

There may be yet an earlier reference to the *Rūs* in the Arabic sources. The *Kitāb Sūrat al-ard* of al-Khwārizmī (d. c.850) is a reworking of Ptolemy's *Geographia* and the title 'an image of the earth' is, in fact, a translation of Ptolemy's title. It contains much of the original material but Al-Khwārizmī supplemented it in many places with new information from his own lifetime. Among the long lists of places and their coordinates we find a mention of a certain 'mountain of *rūs*' which Al-Khwārizmī places in the sixth climate: 'the river *dr(y)ws* which flows from the mountain of *rūs*' (*Kitāb Sūrat al-ard*:136).

Three scholars – Novoseltsev (1965), Golden (1982) and, more recently Montgomery (2008) – have suggested that this may be the first reference to *Rūs*, though none appear to have dealt with this question in depth. It is important to note that although the date of Al-Khwārizmī's work is uncertain, it has been dated to the early 830 or even c.820 (Kennedy 1984:xxii), which, if correct, would make it the earliest occurrence.

The text of *Kitāb Sūrat al-Ard* presents various difficulties. The first difficulty arises because the only surviving manuscript (11th c., Cod. 4247 Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, Strasbourg) is very damaged. Secondly, the coordinates for longitude and latitude are written in letters indicating numerical value instead of numbers. An additional problem is that there is inconsistency in the diacritical marking of these letters, and in placenames. Finally, the prime or zero meridian that Al-Khwārizmī used is not the same as that of Ptolemy, which was fixed around the Canary Islands, but some 10 degrees west of that along an imaginary 'western shore of the encompassing sea', i.e. the Atlantic (E.S. and M.H. Kennedy 1984:xi).

On closer examination of this last peculiarity of the *Kitāb Sūrat al-Ard* it seems unlikely that Al-Khwārizmī is referring to the *Rūs* because it does not match the location repeatedly given for them by subsequent ninth- and tenth-century sources. Firstly, these coordinates quite consistently point to a longitude of about 27 degrees and a latitude of about 44 degrees, which in Al-Khwārizmī's system is approximately North West Spain. Secondly, several placenames – Logroño, Baiona, Tolosa – in the geographical vicinity of this 'mountain of *rūs*' seem to confirm this approximate location. The river *drws* or *dryws* could be the well known Duero, or *Durius* in Latin, which begins in the mountains North-west of Soria in North West Spain. Additionally, an initial alif appears sporadically in the word *rūs* in the manuscript (cf. Mžik 1926:136). This may change the reading to include a vowel, although as customary the Arabic does not mark the quality of that vowel. A tentative identification of a placename corresponding to A/I/U-rus is, of course, speculative although in the eastern Pyrenees there are both *Urús* and *Arús* and not far from Soria is mount Rasón. The highest point of the mountains from which the Duero springs is called *Picos de Urbión*, possibly providing the underlying form for the Arabic *u.r.w.s.* > *urwis*, or something to that effect.

No later sources mention *Rūs* anywhere in the vicinity of Al-Khwārizmī's coordinates. Although the reading of both coordinates and placenames in Al-Khwārizmī's work is subject to debate it seems very likely that the reference in the *Annales Bertiniani* is the earliest occurrence of the name *Rūs*.

Mapping the Early Rūs

But how can the information contained in these earliest written notices of the early *Rūs/Rhos* be interpreted in order to get an idea of their movements and whereabouts? Even though the passage in the *Annals of St Bertin* is set at the palace of Louis the Pious on the Rhine and although they are said to be Swedes, there are reasons to connect these *Rūs/Rhos* with the eastern realms. Of special interest is the identification of their king as *khagan* which appears to be the title used by numerous Turkic peoples, for example the Khazars. Golden (1982:621-22) believes *chacanus* is a variant of Turkic *qagan*, cf. Arab. *khaqan*. It is worth noting that Khazaria and Byzantium had close political ties and, at this period, they had a common interest in fending off their common enemies, mainly the Pechenegs and the Majghārīyyāh (Magyars). This association, among other things, saw the construction of the fort at Sarkel on the Don around 840 (Golden 2004:38). The Khazars were important to Constantinople as they constituted a line of defence against incursions from the steppe.

It is interesting, in the quotation given earlier, just how concerned with the safety of these *Rūs* the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus is reported to be. It is noted that they came to Constantinople traversing regions of 'primitive tribes that were very fierce and savage and Theophilus did not wish them to return that way in case some disaster befell them'. Could Theophilus's 'fierce and savage tribes' be a reference to the Pechenegs and the Magyars living to the north and north-east of the Black Sea, and was it important that nothing happened to the *Rūs* because they were *also* allied with, or perhaps vassals of, the Khazar *khagan*? The level of speculation here is considerable but it remains that while Louis the Pious was familiar with the Swedes, the name *Rhos* did not appear to be familiar to him or to his court and he had to inquire about their provenance. This is in contrast to Ibn Khurradādhbih's text where the *Rūs* appear to be well-known not only in the area but also to him, at least *he* states their provenance without hesitation. Can we deduce from this that until 839 the name *Rhos/Rūs* had been exclusively an oriental denomination?

That the information about the *Rūs* in the *Annales Bertiniani*, in particular the possible connection with the Khazars, seems to point eastwards needs not surprise us. In most of the ninth- and tenth-century Arabic sources the *Rūs* appear to be geographically, economically and politically connected to the Khazars, and to the Volga Bulghārs in the mid-Volga region as recorded by several sources. Ibn Khurradādhbih, as we have seen, writes in the 840s that they pass through Khazaria to the Caspian sea. Ibn Rustah, writing around 900 but basing some of his information on earlier sources (such as Jayhani and al-Jarmi writing in 842-847), states that those who trade with the Volga Bulghārs are the Khazars and the *Rūs* and that the *Rūs* sell their slaves to the Volga Bulghārs and the Khazars (Ibn Rustah:145-7). According to Al-Mas'ūdī, writing in the first half of the tenth century, the *Rūs* live in Itil, the capital city of the Khazars, along with people of all religions, and we are told that they are slaves and soldiers of the Khazar ruler (*Murūj adh-Dhahab* I:187). Elsewhere he reports that what is probably the Azov Sea belongs to the *Rūs* and no one else navigates there but them (*Murūj adh-Dhahab* II:15). In yet another place he claims that they live in the vicinity of the Caucasus (*Kitāb al-tanbih wa 'l-ishrāf*:184). Furthermore, according to Al-Mas'ūdī, they appear to be on good terms with the Khazar governors who in 912 allowed them to use the Volga to enter the Caspian Sea in order to raid peoples living on its coastline. In return they were to give the Khazars half of what they amassed through their plundering (*Murūj adh-Dhahab* II:18-25). And there are more such references.

To conclude, in the light of the evidence reviewed here it is probable that although the first surviving written reference to the *Rūs/Rhos* was made in the Frankish realm in 839, they had been known for some time prior to that in eastern lands (Khazaria, the Caliphate, and Byzantium). It is difficult to ascertain with any precision how long they had been in the east before they were first documented by Ibn Khurradādhbih in the 840's. Golden (1982) has convincingly suggested that Ibn Khurradādhbih's information may have been slightly older, from 840 or before. Since the *Rūs* are connected by later authors with the trade in silver dirham coins, it is tempting to like their arrival in North Caucasus with the significant rise in that trade in around 800. Finally, we should note

that the appearance of the *Rūs* as a commonplace name in the Arabic geographical literature is coeval with the emergence of geographical science and exploration in the Caliphate, and in particular that strand of geography that took interest in the regions north of the Caucasus. We may postulate that if Muslim geography had developed earlier we would possess earlier references to the *Rūs*.

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