

Europe in the eyes of Andalusian travelers

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Arabs' journeys and missions to Europe were not only those undertaken by travelers of the eastern Abbasid Empire. There were similar travelers from Andalusia which was under Umayyad rule at the time. The Umayyad caliphs built lasting ties with the Byzantines, the opponent of the rival Abbasids. They exchanged messengers and missions, like the ones coming from Constantinople to the Umayyad Andalusian capital, Cordoba, transmitting the Byzantines' request for an alliance with the Umayyad to face a mutual enemy, the Franks, especially in Charlemagne's era. Political ties between Constantinople and Cordoba thrived, particularly under the rule of the emperor Constantine the Seventh and the great Umayyad caliph Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir.

The emirate of Abd al-Rahman was magnificent and grand, so much so in fact that many Byzantine, Frankish and Zoroastrian kings, like the emperor of Constantinople, sent him gifts and sought treaties with him(1). In the month of Safar of 338/949, the emperor Constantine the Seventh dispatched a delegation to Andalusia; it was welcomed warmly and with much hospitality in the court of Abd al-Rahman who sent a delegation of his own in return. The external diplomatic relations of the Andalusian Ummayyds were not limited to Constantinople or the Frankish lands, i.e. Frankish Gaul. These relations extended to the British and neighboring Islands.

Later, the Normans, migrant peoples of the north, made these northern islands their home. They surged onto the European political scene and their sneak attacks sowed fear in the hearts of their neighbors. They multiplied their conquests, moving deeper from the deserted coastal areas into the inner cities, thus cornering the Franks. They reached Paris and

other cities in Western Europe, and then extended their reach as far as Andalusia; a target they were able to attain by navigating rivers. Their first sneak attack on the city, in 230/844, was so sudden that the Andalusian Arabs had no previous knowledge of these peoples. The Arabs later called the Normans “Zoroastrians” (Majus), the name they reserved for fire worshippers, because the Normans were still pagans at the time and had not converted to Christianity, and would light a fire wherever they went(2).

Seville, Cordoba and Kadesh became their targets, because these cities were known for their riches and splendor. The Normans arrived in Seville, their black sails spreading over the river, ran amok all over the city’s suburbs, and pillaged it. In the end, the Andalusian Arab plan of destroying the Norman ships when they got back from Seville worked. Both parties declared peace and exchanged prisoners. The Normans were forced to stop their raids on Andalusia and increased diplomatic relations ensued linking

Andalusia with the British islands where the Normans had settled. The Arabs sought to know more about the Normans and to improve relations with them. Similarly, the Normans realized the extent of the Andalusian Arabs' power. Their king at the time was called "Turjaius," and resided in northern Ireland, from where he ran the affairs of the islands. He sent a delegation to the Andalusian prince Abd al-Rahman al-Awsat, after his raid had failed. The delegation received with a warm welcome, for the prince wished to thwart the Norman threat, and at the same time try to unite with them against the Franks of Gaul(3).

The Ummayyad prince sent a delegation to accompany the Normans back to their lands and sign a peace treaty with them. He chose Yahya al-Ghazzal, the renowned "Sage and Poet of Andalusia," to head it. The oldest official journey which we know of through tales and news of third parties, other than reports from the traveller himself is the mission of Yahya b. al-Hakam al-Bakri(153-250/770-864), a handsome man nicknamed

"al-Ghazzal" (the flirt). He was dispatched on two occasions, by Abd al-Rahman b. al-Hakam, the prince of Cordoba: His first mission was with a delegation to Constantinople, to sign a peace treaty with the emperor Tufil. The second was to the Jutland in the north, apparently to negotiate with the Normans who had raided Andalusia and pillaged Seville. Ibn Dahiyyah and al-Mukari, and many other Andalusian historians write about these missions, as did al-Ghazzal himself in some of his verses(4).

News of the first mission is related by Andalusia's historian of the thirteenth century CE, Ibn Dahiyyah, while the second is mentioned by al-Makri in *Nafh al-Tib*, in the seventeenth century. Al-Ghazzal is of noble Arab descent, famed for his vast knowledge, multilingual tongue and great poetic talent. Al-Makri relates of Ibn Hayyan's *al-Muktabas*: "al-Ghazzal was a sage, poet and fortune teller."(5) These traits of al-Ghazzal were probably responsible for the prince's choosing of him as the to the Norman king. He carried a

message and traveled with the Norman delegation as it made its way back to its homeland from Andalusia. In late summer of 221/845, prince Abd al-Rahman charged a whole convoy with gifts to the Norman king, and gave al-Ghazzal a message to the Jutland king. The missionary's age at this time was around fifty years, and he is reported to have already had grey hair(6).

When al-Ghazzal left Andalusia, and sailed on the Manche. The waters were wild in those September days, so he was seized with fits of sea sickness and fear for the safety of his companions(7). Ibn Dahiyyah says: "When they came close to the grand cap to the west of Andalusia, known as mountain Alawayh, the sea went wild and they were assailed by stormy winds. Al-Ghazzal described the situation in his poetry."(8) This hard maritime journey ended with the al-Ghazzal and the Normans ships reaching a small island of western Ireland where they stayed for a few days and fixed their ships. The Norman ship went ahead of the Arab ship so it could inform

its king of the Muslim delegation's arrival. Ibn Dahiyyah relates al-Ghazzal saying: "The Zoroastrian ship made its way to its king and informed him of the delegation's arrival, of which he was pleased."(9)

The king agreed to meet with the delegation, which went to his quarters and stayed on his island. This happened 100 years before the Normans converted to Christianity,(10) so the description al-Ghazzal gives is for an island inhabited by Zoroastrians. He said: "It is a big island, surrounded by the sea that has flowing sources of water and gardens. Three hundred miles separate it from the mainland, and innumerable Zoroastrians live on it."(11) He goes on to speak of their neighbors in the adjoining land who are ten days' travel away. These were once Zoroastrians but turned Christianity, except for a few, like the Jutland population who fight the Christian tribes. We can clearly discern al-Ghazzal's preference for Christianity over Zoroastrism. Christians were, for al-Ghazzal, a people with a holy Book,

who did not indulge in sin as Zoroastrians were supposed to do. He depicts this in his description of the island, its population and their neighbors, among whom are Christians. He says: “They live next to Zoroastrians who are now Christians who no longer worship fire. There are nonetheless a few exceptions on some islands who are still faithful to the first Zoroastrian religion.” Al-Ghazzal, as did every Arab Muslim, thought that Zoroastrism did not impose any moral restraints. Its followers have nothing forbidden like the customary traditions in al-Ghazzal’s culture. They were considered no different than the women of the North, like the Turks, Slavs and Bulgarians, where pagan freedom was thought to allow woman to have only one sexual partner, as al-Ghazzal noted. He wrote: “They still follow their initial, Zoroastrist religion and practice dishonorable acts like incest with their mothers and sisters.”(12)

Al-Ghazzal faced two trying situations afterwards. The first is the extent to which he respects the dignity of the state and nation he

represents, and the second is a test of his beliefs which do not allow for bowing before anything other than God. Al-Ghazzal asked the king from the beginning not to demand anything of him that might oppose his Arabic Muslim traditions, or his religious teachings. Thus, he asked him “not to demand of him to bow or act in a way contrary to his religious duties. The King agreed to comply.” He nevertheless tried to trick him into bowing before him. The called on al-Ghazzal and a couple of his companions, and ordered them to enter his quarters from such a narrow passageway “that could only be crossed on hands and knees.” Al-Ghazzal maneuvered this task with wit—“he sat on the ground and used his legs to push him forward, thus crawling on his backside. When he reached the door, he stood up.” The king had outfitted his quarters with arms and decorations, but al-Ghazzal was “neither frightened nor intimidated. He approached the king, paid his respects and told him: Peace be upon you, O king and all those in your company. I extend a respectful salute to you and wish you

continuing glory, a long life and dignity both in this world and the next, that can only be with the agreement and presence of God almighty, the only eternal presence who is the sole judge and reference.”(13)

Al-Ghazzal persisted in being a dignified representative of the Muslim community and a devout, Monotheistic Muslim, even before the Zoroastrian king. The king, having heard al-Ghazzal’s translated words, expressed his deep admiration for him and all that he represents of the Muslim Arab civilization. He said: “This here is a wise and clever man of that nation.” The king marveled at al-Ghazzal's resourcefulness in sitting and crawling on his backside, to pass the test made to humiliate him—“we had sought to humiliate him, and he came to us standing on his feet. Had he not been a messenger, this would have been forbidden him.”(14)

Al-Ghazzal presented the king with the letter from Abd al-Rahman, which the king liked. He admired the gifts of “clothes and ware”(15) brought to him as well. He allotted

al-Ghazzal and his companions quarters in which to stay, and was generous with them. Al-Ghazzal relates how he excelled in every field, winning debates with “scholars and tests of bravery with the strongest of men, which revealed the supremacy of his civilization.

The second testing situation al-Ghazzal encountered was his relationship with the king’s wife, with whom he, the sensitive poet, exchanged mutual admiration and affection. This relationship, however, showed the rift between both of the two respective cultures' systems of values: al-Ghazzal’s culture vs. Zoroastrian Nordic Europe. The meeting of both cultures was branded with surprises and points of discord.

When the king’s wife heard of al-Ghazzal and his excellence in every matter, she demanded to see him. He came to her, presented his greetings, and then fell silent in a long admiring look. The queen had the translator ask him for the reason of his staring look: Was it driven by admiration or dislike? Al-Ghazzal answered: “If I stare, it is because

I have never imagined such a marvelous image. The queen's beauty and distinctive qualities can only be rightly distinguished by poets. If Mylady so desires, then I shall describe her beauty, nobility and great mind in poetry transmitted in all our lands." The queen was extremely pleased and ordered that a gift be given him; but he refused. She asked him, by way of translator, for the reason of his rejection: Is it that he thinks little of it or of myself?

Al-Ghazzal answered: "Hers is a most generous gift, and accepting it is a great honor, for she is a queen, of royal blood. All the reward I need, however, is looking at her and seeing that she accepts my visits. There is no gift beyond that." The queen's admiration and pleasure were only to increase and she asked that he call on her frequently, "whenever he so wished to visit, he may have free access and I shall offer him a dignified and warm welcome."(16)

Tammam b. Alkama relates one of al-Ghazzal's talks of the queen: "She was of

some beauty, but I sought to gain her affection through my words and eventually got more of her than I had imagined.”(17) He says that the Zoroastrian queen, called Nud, took such a liking to him that no day would go by without her asking to see him. He would go to her and stay for a long time, speaking to her of Muslims, and of their news, lands, and neighboring civilizations. She once asked the grey haired poet how old he was. He playfully answered that he was twenty years old. She had the translator ask him how a twenty-year old can have grey hairs, to which he responded: Why does the queen deny this? Has she never seen a grey newborn pony? Nud laughed and liked his answer, and he wrote a poem about the incident(18).

The queen became increasingly attached to al-Ghazzal and there was seldom a day when she did not send him a gift of clothes, food or perfume after he left her quarters. Rumors involving their relationship began to spread and the poet’s companions disavowed him and warned him of the consequences of

his love. His visits to the queen decreased and when she asked him of the reason he openly shared his fears with her, related to their frequent contact. This incident made him realize that there was a big gap between the ethics and values of the Normans and Arabs, especially concerning relationships between men and women who are not constrained by the same bonds that al-Ghazzal's Islamic culture imposes. When he confessed his fear that their love might be exposed, she laughed at him and dismissed the matter as insignificant. She told him "our faith does not prohibit this (meaning sexual relationships outside wedlock). We know no jealousy and our women choose to be with the men they want as long as they desire. If they so wish, they can part with them at any given moment. All Zoroastrian women, before some became Christians, were in the habit of giving themselves to men without any qualms. The only shame was for a noble woman to couple with an inferior ranking man."(19).

Having discovered this, al-Ghazzal resumed his relationship with the queen and only parted with her when he had to leave the Norman lands, after a two-month stay. He came back to his home and gave an account of his love affair and the Normans in the pre-Christian era. His tales gave us and others an enlightened ethnographical description of the religious and social lives of the Normans, as well as their social customs and habits and their religious beliefs and practices in historical era of the pre-Christian British, Irish and Scandinavian islands that still holds mysteries. His residence in Jutland may have extended over a period of three months, while his journey to and fro took up to twenty months.

The Journey of Ibrahim b. Ya'qub al-Tartushi(354/ 965)

Cordoba's Andalusian caliph dispatched Ibrahim b. Ya'qub al-Tartushi in 354/965 to King Otto the Great, in Magdeburg. The

messenger set out from Spain and traveled along the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, through the French Bordeaux, Rouen and Arras, passing Schafzig, Baderborn, Sisst and Felda, getting to Mainz.

Ibrahim was an Andalusian Jewish scholar, a child of Muslim Arabic culture who worked as a slave trader. He gives an extended account of the Slavic principalities in Medieval Europe, and provides rich information on the coastal and western cities of the French, Dutch and German littoral. He also writes about Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the principality of Narvon(20).

Al-Tartoushi was not a mere trader but a passionate book collector and an expert on Spain, France, Germany and the western Slavic lands. He was also a keen observer. His journeys' accounts are mostly lost, and only the parts on Germany and the Slavs remained, safeguarded by al-Bakri, al-Qazwini and al-Udhri, and from them to other authors like Ibn Said al-Gharnati, Abu al-Fida' and al-Dimashqi(21).

The newly established relationship between the Andalusian prince and the leader of the Holy Roman Empire, Otto the Great, may well have prepared the means and the ends for al-Tartoushi's trip. Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir exchanged messengers with the king of the Slavs and emperor of Germany Otto the Great (936-973), who later became the Holy Roman Emperor. Otto had dispatched a delegation to the Andalusian caliph, so he would put a stop to the Arab raids on the kingdom of Provence. Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir sent a delegation in return, to establish political ties with Otto. One of the delegations he sent was headed by an Andalusian bishop, who was transporting with him a book written in Arabic on the matter of the Holy Trinity. The bishop died before he reached his destination, however, and Otto took the discussion about the Trinity for an insult, consequently mistreating the messengers.

Shortly afterwards, Otto dispatched a delegation to Cordoba and assigned Jean de Gorza to head it. It reached its final destination in 345/956, but the message it carried was

insulting to the Arabic messenger, thus the caliph al-Nasir detained the embassy for nine years, in response to Otto's withholding of the Andalusian embassy for three years. The Andalusian caliph sent a Christian messenger named Raysmond to Otto, asking him to change his first letter. The mission succeeded and Otto replaced the first letter with another one that reached Cordoba eighteen months after the first. The caliph then permitted Gorza to leave Andalusia(22).

This is the context in which al-Tartoushi's journey took place. He visited the emperor Otto, who welcomed him as both a guest and a messenger of the Andalusian caliph in Magdeburg. Thus was the long journey that took him across Europe and to the north of it, in the area that now forms Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Germany and Ukraine. Ibn Al Ibri also mentions a meeting al-Tartoushi had with the Roman king in 350/961 in Rome, who is no other than Pope John XII (955-964), during which he was accompanied by Rabi b. Zayd al-Usquf al-

Qurtubi. The latter had written a letter to the Hakim al-Mustansir, the Cordovan caliph, Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir's son, which told of a journey he made to Germany during the rule of emperor Otto the Great. Al-Bakri safeguarded much of this letter.

In the account transmitted by al-Bakri, al-Tartoushi details his trip to eastern Europe, his voyage across the Adriatic Sea, his arrival in the lands of the Slavs of the west, his visit to Prague and eastern Germany, then his arrival to Magdeburg, the residence of Otto. There, he met with ambassadors of the Bulgarian king, then travelled following the riverside of the Alps, across the Slavic lands, reaching Schwerin, next to the lake. It is difficult to trace his journey accurately for the names he mentioned of places are extremely distorted. Despite this, the details included in his account of the Slavic lands remain valuable to the history of this people, especially to their western branch. Some historians have found a link between the names he wrote and names of real places, towns and people. He had used

"Mady Frug" for Magdeburg, "Bouema" for Bohemia, "Morman" for Norman and "Bishka" for Vavcu and "Bretonionbons" for Bretons, and so on. After much probing, we realize the geographical and historical importance of al-Tartushi's account of these visits and places(23). It is only natural for German and Slav scholars to be especially interested in the valuable and rare information al-Tartushi gives of his journey(24).

The report of his journey was closer to a geographical description. He speaks of countries, describes them, counts their production, stores, roads with their length and includes important information on the social and political status(25). He also gives us rare and precious details on the way they were ruled and governed, their religion, beliefs and races, of the marriage and burial rituals, of architecture, trade, agriculture, the weather, its influences on the population, and the ways they resist it.

The Slavs

Al-Tartushi visited his “Slavic lands” in 965, and drew a vivid image of their lives. His report remains valuable, even though it comes fifty years after Ibn Fadlan’s and al-Massoudi’s which we shall mention later. Al-Tartushi says that the Slavs come from Mathay b. Japeth’s bloodline. They live in lands of the north that extend to the Orient, spreading from the northern Baltic Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, thus joining the Mediterranean and Baltic seas, in a cradle of vast lands. The Slavs used to live with the tribes of the north, which comprise of different races that were once grouped under the authority of a king named Macha, or Majik for al-Mas‘udi, a descendent of the Wolynjane noble race. When the language of this people became less used, the unifying order and ties that bonded them also disappeared and they scattered into separate groups, ruled by different kings(26).

Al-Tartushi groups these races in four kingdoms. The first is the Bulgarian kingdom, headed by their king. The second is headed by

Boleslav the First (929-967), and its main cities are the present Prague, Bohemia, ex-Czechoslovakia, and Krakow. The third kingdom is that of the northern lands and Poland,(27) ruled by Mieszkoi the First (960-992) and named after him, according to al-Qazwini's account of al-Tartushi's report.(28) As for the fourth and last kingdom, it is the Slav Noccon kingdom in the far west of Slavic land. It may have been called after Naccon (d. 966), the prince of the tribes that inhabited northern Germany and lived in Mecklenburg Schwern. He gives a detailed description of all four kingdoms starting with the last one that the visited on the way to Otto's court.

The Noccon kingdom

According to al-Tartushi, the city of Noccon, the kingdom's capital, is far from "Burg" the capital of Otto's empire, north of Magdeburg. There is a fort in the city, called the Grad, or grand fort, faced by another similar building in the middle of a sweet water lake, that is eleven

miles away from the Baltic Sea. He also says that these lands are full of prairies, bushes and muddy earth, and concludes that armies would encounter difficulties in crossing them because of this. His description also shows that there was no organized urbanization or agriculture in the kingdom(29). He adds that the people are brave and courageous, and their removal from all civilization and urbanization leaves him with no positive traits to introduce them with than this: their courage, steadfastness and orderly forts.

Al-Tartushi writes that to the west of this kingdom lies the present Saxony (north-west Germany), as well as populations of Zoroastrian Norsemen, habitants of the Scandinavian lands, or the Danish. Where they live is a city that is a regular destination for tradesmen because of the low cost of merchandise in it and its horse export. Al-Tartushi says “its warriors are brave people and wear armor and helmets and carry swords. It is also famous for its forts.”(30).

The Boleslav Kingdom (Prague, Bohemia)

The second kingdom, called Boleslav after its ruler at the time, the Bohemian king Boleslav the First (929-967) has the following main cities: Prague, Bohemia and ex-Czechoslovakia. He describes this kingdom as the lands spreading from Prague to Krakow (presently Poland), that equal three weeks worth of travel. He also cites other cities of the kingdom, like Calp, Neuburg (which contains a fort built of stone and special material) on the meeting point of the rivers Sal and Bode, and Wurzen, on the Mulde River, which also has a fort.

Two miles separate the Calp fort from Neuburg, which is thirty miles away from the Jewish Ghetto, and the Burgen fort and twenty five miles away from the forest. The latter is forty miles in length, ending with a wooden bridge over a two-mile stretch of black mud. Over at the edge of the forest lies Prague, a city of stone and limestone, where there is an abundance of shops. Al-Tartushi shows it as the heart of an important international trade

movement, where traders of all parts come for business, like the Russians and Slavs from Krakow, Arab Muslim traders, Jewish businessmen and Turkish merchants. They exchange their goods for slaves, flour, tin and dyed leather, and use the Byzantine currency that Ibrahim calls “small flecks.”(31).

He speaks of their production and wealth: “The population in Prague makes saddles and bridles used in those parts. Their land presents the best living conditions in those parts, and since all natural resources abound in it, good can be bought at very low prices; hay for forty bests can be bought with one unit of their currency.”(32).

He says that Bohemia is a “prosperous city whose people make light scarves, knit in a web-like manner.” Al-Tartushi may be referring to the lace that Czech Republic is famous for to this day—“they sell them at ten scarves to one unit. But they also use these scarves as currency and exchange them for wheat and flour, horses, gold, silver and all other things.” Ibrahim is surprised that “the

population of Bohemia is comprised of dark skinned, dark haired people, and there are very little numbers of blond individuals.”(33).

The Mieszko Kingdom

This kingdom is named after the king, or duke of Poland, Mieszko the First (960-992). Ibrahim reported that it was a vast and rich land, where food, meat, honey and cultures abound. Taxes of a small “flecked currency” are collected and the king pays special attention to the army and allocates enormous sums to it. Ibrahim also describes the rituals of marriages and points out the sums the king pays in soldier remunerations every month; a sum he takes out of the kingdom’s wealth. There are three thousand armored men that he believes to be “so brave that one hundred of them are as strong as one thousand men”. Courage is the trait, or stereotyped view that all Arab travelers and geographers had of the Slavs. “The king provides his men with all the horses, saddles, meat, weapons etc that they

may need. If a man has a child, be it boy or girl, the king orders that a sum of money be paid him from the moment he is born. If he is a boy, the king pays the dowry to his father-in-law.”(34) If it’s a girl, he would “marry her off and pay her father the dowry.”(35)

Their customary dowry was so large that if a man had a two or three daughters, he would become rich, as opposed to the man who had two or three sons, who would be ruined(36). Marriage was of such an importance there, that “marrying was a must, not a choice, in the view of their king who would provide all the supplies and necessary accessories for it”. Al-Qazwini portrays the king as the patriarchal authority who played the role of a “father watching over his people.”(37).

Concerning the ever-sensitive issue of the relationship between men and women, al-Qazwini reports of Ibrahim that he found Mieszko men “extremely possessive when it comes to their women”, as opposed to other Slavs(38).

The Bulgarian Kingdom

Ibrahim did not visit the Bulgarian lands, i.e. the Balkans, but he heard of their ways. He speaks of his coincidental meeting with the Bulgarian ambassadors to the king Otto the Great in Magdeburg. He saw that “they wore tight clothes and belts beaded with gold and silver.” Faithful to an Arabic tradition of praising the other whenever occasion arises, Ibrahim says of the Bulgarian king that he was a “great crowned king, who had under his command multilingual scribes, strategist and administrators, organized according to an order that befits kings.” He mentions that they translated the Bible into their language, which denotes that they were Christians.

He details the way Christianity was introduced into the region: When the Bulgarian king attacked the Roman lands and besieged Constantinople, the city’s monarch gained his favors and his friendship by presenting him with gifts. His greatest act of

friendship was when he gave him his daughter's hand in marriage, who eventually led her husband to convert to Christianity(39). Al-Tartushi apparently drew this information from his chance meeting with the Bulgarian ambassadors in Magdeburg in 965. The Arabs saw the emergence of Christianity, a religion of the people of the Book, in these lands, as a sign of civility. Christianity was to them better than Zoroastrism.

Al-Tartushi noted that there were other neighboring Slav or non-Slav nations in addition to the four kingdoms: The Russians to the east of the Mieszko, and the Prussians in Prussia to the north west of Poland. He describes them as “people living on the Baltic Sea, who speak their own language and are ignorant of the languages of surrounding peoples. They are courageous people, and if occasion arises, everyone goes to fight and never leaves the battlefield, even if it meant his certain death.” He adds that “Russians would attack the Prussians from boats coming from the west.”(40).

Al-Tartushi also speaks of the city of women, a subject that would later be mentioned by al-Idrisi and other Arab geographers. Al-Tartushi may have gotten wind of this mythical city during his stay at Otto's court. He says that this city of women has "they have riches and slaves, who impregnate them. If they give birth to a boy, he is killed straight away; if the baby is a girl, they keep her. They are courageous women, good riders and warriors who initiate combats... this city is real, and Otto the Roman Emperor attested to it."(41).

He also speaks of a place on the Caspian route that he calls Warnak, on the southern part of the bay where the sea of the North starts. This spot of the bay is called Warnak Sea, and he may be referring to the Baltic Sea and Denmark, which lies on the farthest point to the north. It is a place of extreme cold, thick winds and continuous snow and is neither a viable environment for plants nor animals that very few human beings reach because of its extreme cold, darkness and snow(42). This

image of the northern lands is engraved in the Arab Islamic imagination of these places on the far edge of the seventh region of the world.

He also speaks of a country called “Wisso,” located behind the Bulgarian lands, a three month journey away from them and might most probably be Belorussia. He says that there are periods when the daylight almost extends all through the night and others when the night almost covers the day. He adds that the population of this land “exchange goods with the Bulgarians without meeting with them. Every one party puts his goods in a certain area and marks it. He would find the goods of the other party on another side and inspect them. If he likes the goods, he trades them for his own. This way, neither seller nor buyer meets with the other party. The population of the wisso lands never set foot in the Bulgarian lands, because of the temperature difference and the same goes for the Bulgarians.”(43)

After detailing each kingdom, al-Tartushi examines the Slav race which

comprises of many diverse races. There are the Serbs (according to him), the Dules and the Namjin. The latter may be some sort of a German tribe, since he counts the Germans as Slavs as well and considers them the bravest of all. There are also the “Serbian Serbs, feared by the Slavs”, the Moravians, the Croats, the “Rassassin” and “Hashyabin” (according to his transcription). Al-Tartushi specifies that all of these different races follow different religious paths—“there are those who are Jacobine Christians while others are still without a book and a law system, and thus are still pagans.”(44).

Al-Tartushi noted that all Slavs choose water and lakeside regions to build their forts. They seek pastures with many bushes and much water where they draw a round or rectangular frontier, according to the surface and shape of the fort. They dig all around it trenches that they fill up with dirt then board it up until the wooden wall reaches the height they had set. They build a gate for it that they get to through a wooden bridge(45).

Al-Tatrushi's vision is shared by other travelers and representatives of the Aran Muslim culture. They all view Slavs as brave and courageous people: "The Slavs are such strong and hard people that had they not been separated onto diverse races and parts, no nation would have been able to defend itself against them."(46) He verifies reports of the riches of their lands; they live on the most fertile and profiting land, and "are arduous laborers, best at working the land than all others." Their excellence is not to be found in agriculture and courage only, since they also have a "free trade flow on both land and sea towards Russia and Constantinople." The only threat to their work and agriculture are water flows—"their lands will never know crises of infertility and insufficient water supply. On the contrary, their problems arise of the floods of water. They have two seasons to plant, the summer and the spring while they harvest the crops twice and mostly plant tobacco."(47).

Al-Tartushi also gives news of the weather and the illnesses it causes, as well as their food and clothing:

Despite the extreme weather, the cold in their land suits them while heat harms them. They do not travel therefore to the Lombardians' hot territories. To them, good health is wherever there is dry weather; once it starts getting hot, their bodies wither and die. There are two common illnesses to all: the redness of fever and sinus problems. They avoid chicken meat that they claim causes them flushing, and prefer cow and goose meat that suit their bodies. They drink honey juices and wear baggy clothes with tight-fitting sleeves(48).

They mostly plant apple, pear and prune trees. There is a weird looking bird, called "Saba" which has green feathers on its back that roams their lands and repeats the sounds

people and animals make. They also have a kind of wild bird that look like hens that they call “Tatra.” Its meat is good and it can be heard singing from the tops of trees. There are two species of this bird that is even more beautiful than peacocks: a completely black one and a spotted one(49).

Al-Tartushi details the extent of the cold which makes them invent different shapes for houses, toilets and vehicles for travel. They are generally known to inhabit the coldest of spots that reach the epitome of cold on starry nights and clear days. On these days, the cold becomes so extreme that the freeze invades all: The land, and liquids all become solid substances, just like water from wells and other sources that turn as solid as stone: “Water solidifies on people’s beards and becomes glassy-like, hard to break until they enter warm places with stoves. Meanwhile, all ships break and their passengers die.” Al-Tartushi notes that this extreme weather drove them to invent special heating techniques. Although they do not have bathrooms, they

shower through sauna steam “they build cottages of wood whose cracks, (like those in ships) they fill with a substance they call “Makh,” which works as tar and resembles moss they scoop off tree trunks. They build a brazier inside the cottage and make a small opening on its top surface so as to let the smoke out. When the brazier heats up, they close the opening and the cottage door, and then pour water over the hot surface of the brazier so the vapor fills the air. Each person then takes some leaves to fan the vapor and attract it closer to his body. Their pores all open and let out the filth in their bodies that melt like running streams and their bodies are left with no trace of burn or scar whatsoever.”(50).

To travel, their kings use four-wheeled vehicles drawn by cattle “on which they hang a small carriage fastened with thick, silk-veiled chains. These vehicles are used to transport the wounded and the sick, also to fight the Romans, Francs Lombards, and others.”(51).

He also wrote that some of them, still Zoroastrians, like the Serbs, burn themselves and their beasts if their chief dies: “They have similar customs to Eastern Indians. They delight at cremating the dead, because they believe this is an act of holy mercy. The dead person’s women cut their faces and arms and if one of them wishes to express her deep love for him, she would stand on a chair near him and attach her neck to his body. The chair is then pulled from under her feet and she hangs in that spot until she dies and is burned with him.”(52).

As other Arab writers did, al-Tartushi pays special interest to Slav women. He relates that Slav men were jealous over their wives who were kept hidden from prying eyes. A man marries at least twenty women(53). As for the woman, she preserves a pure sexual attitude after marriage as opposed to a liberated one when she is still single. She is faithful to the man she loves and stays with him so long as she wishes. If “her husband finds that she is still a virgin, he tells her: had

you been any good, men would have desired you before and you would have picked one to lose your virginity with. After which he leaves her.”(54).

The Franks (France and the neighboring lands)

Ibrahim b. Ya‘qub’s depiction of the Franks was rather clear. But the farther west and north he goes in his description, the more obscure the image gets, the more the information becomes a fleeting vision of the social, cultural and economic features.

The Franks seem undefined. Al-Bakri sometimes groups under this title all of Japeth’s sons, including the population of Galicia and the neighboring Andalusian lands, along with Slavs, Lombards and Spaniards. Nevertheless, al-Tartushi was more inclined, in the parts of his journey that al-Bakri and al-Qazwini preserved, to consider the Franks’ lands limited specifically in Paris and the neighboring places. He noted that the Franks’

capital is “Paris, a great city. They also reign over close to 150 cities that all follow the royal Christian faith.”(55) These lands are at the heart of the fifth region, according to al-Bakri,(56) whereas al-Qazwini sees them as “vast territories to the far end of the west of the sixth region. They count 150 cities of which Paris is the center. The territories extend along a month’s journey in length and even more in width.”(57) These lands are one wide kingdom, in Christian territory, where the cold is extreme and winds thick. There is an abundance of natural riches, fruits and crops in it: a land of much culture, trees, honey and rivers of the melting snow. Its cities are well built and guarded with walls; it has riches of silver and an excellent production of sharp swords that are even better than Indian ones.”(58).

He adds that these lands are inhabited by a population of Christians, ruled over by a strong king with much power and wealth. There are two to three coastal cities in it, on the Mediterranean, in the center of the Muslim

lands “this kingdom also includes these cities neighboring the Muslim lands.” He may be referring to the southern regions of Italy, or even Rome, or the ones next to the Sicilian coast, that the Muslims were unable to subdue.

He describes the king’s soldiers as “courageous,” a trait all Arabs imagined to be inherent in the Northern European peoples, or even all Europeans to have “for they all prefer to die in war than retreat, and never even contemplate fleeing a war once they meet another army. They prefer to die than do that.” These positive traits, headed by courage, wealth, being on Christian faith and not some pagan beliefs are met with negative ones on the other hand “they are the filthiest people on earth, besides being mean immoral lowlifes, who only take one or two cold showers per year. They never wash the clothes on their backs until it tears up. They shave their beards, and their hairs grow rough and ugly afterwards. When one inquires at their side about the shaving, they say: a hair is a surplus you remove from the vilest spots in your

bodies. How should we leave it on our face then?”(59).

This rhetorical question appears to be justified to both parties. Al-Tartushi paints the Franks' lands as vast and wide until they reach the Mediterranean coast where they become narrow in the vicinity of the Italian island and Lombardia; then it widens again to reach the Alps, a chain of mountains between the Baltic and Adriatic seas. The lands extend to the Northern Slavs lands, or the Zoroastrian fire worshipper lands, inhabited by the English of the British islands. To the west, they reach Navarra, where the Germans, a people speaking a different tongue than the Franks, reside(60).

Al-Tartushi does not only speak in general terms of the Franks' kingdom, borders customs and religion. He gives details of French cities that are thought to have been stops along his long journey. He describes “Bordeaux” as a “land of much water, trees and fruits, mostly comprised of Christians,” meaning it also had some Zoroastrians and

there were “some impenetrable buildings on it, constructed on big walls. There was also amber on its coasts and a big statue on the mountain overlooking it and the ocean which seems to be warning people from crossing the ocean.”(61) This refers to the common belief that there was no land or life behind the ocean, and only darkness and mystery.

He moves on to Utrecht, and says that it is a wide, great land “whose soil is infertile to plant in, so it lives off its livestock riches, its wool and milk. The people also use a special mud for heating purposes that they cut during the summer and leave to dry, then put in next to fire where it catches on and burns, making great fires for winter time.”(62)

He also considered Rouen as a Frankish city, on the Seine River, surrounded by walls and forts and built with engraved stones. It does not have any vines or trees but has an abundance of wheat and other grains. In its river swims a kind of fish they call salmon and another small one like the whale. He also wrote that he saw some kind of a white goose

with red legs and beak. He also mentions an anecdote of a small six-year old whose beard grew(63).

He also visited the vast city of “Filda,” built of stone, only inhabited by monks and the access to which was forbidden to women. There was a grand church in it that was of a great importance to Christians. Al-Tartushi said that he had neither seen a greater church in all Christian lands, nor a richer church with its gold, silver and ware like cups, tureens and ewers of gold and silver. In it, there stands a silver statue representing its founding martyr monk, wearing rubies and emeralds, and opening his arms in a welcome gesture. The statue is that of Christ.

He also talks of a city he calls Afsh, on a river he calls Afs. It has a very abundant source of water and a building not far from it where all the people go to bathe, since the temperature of the water in the source is high(64). We see live images of regions in the Franks kingdom through al-Tartushi’s tale: France and its southern and northern

neighbors. These are a mixture of real, mystery-clad tales, with value judgments of the Arab Muslim culture. He also points out the northern borders behind the Franc territories, on the edge of the seventh region, where the Baltic Sea, British islands and Ireland lie.

The most clearly described regions appears to be northern Ireland where Zoroastrian Normans reside. It is a very vast territory, of 1000 miles in perimeter. It is thought that the clothing and customs of Zoroastrians are Norman ones. They are usually clad in the expensive robe which the Noblemen adorn with jewels. They are famous for fishing whales whose white flesh they consume. Its coasts are full of a small animal they hunt for lunch. It is an excellent breed who only mates in September, and is hunted in October, December and January. After that, its flesh hardens and becomes impossible to eat. Its flesh is white as snow while its skin is black as night(65).

There are also the twelve mysterious far northern British islands next to Ireland. The sea to the north is considered as the end of the earth, while a bay comes out of it to the south, ending with the Baltic sea, the farthest of spots in the North, with extreme cold, thick winds and continuous snow, non-viable for fauna and flora and inaccessible to humans because of its coldness, darkness and snow.

*) Syrian author and scholar.

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29 - Al BAKRI, op.cit, p.159-60.

30 - Ibid, p.158-9.

31 - Ibid, p.161-2.

32 - Ibid, p.162-3.

33 - Ibid, p.163.

34 - Ibid, p. 163, and also AL QAZWINI op.cit, p.617 where he writes “if it’s a male, he would marry him off, take the dowry from his father and present the bride’s father with it.”

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- 50 - Ibid, pp.188-190.
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