



AḤMAD B. FAẒLĀN

AḤMAD B. FAẒLĀN B. AL-‘ABBĀS B. RAŠĪD, author of an extremely important travel narrative written after he had been a member of an embassy in the early 4th/10th century from the ‘Abbasid caliphate to the ruler of the Bulgars on the middle Volga in Russia. Nothing is known of Ebn Faẓlān beyond what we glean from his account, which is apparently based on the official report which he made to the caliphal administration in Baghdad after he returned, though the story of the return journey has not survived. He describes himself as a client (*mawlā*) of Moḥammad b. Solaymān, *kāteb al-ḡayṣ* (head of the war department) and the reconqueror of Egypt from the sons of ʿOmārawayh b. Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn. The purpose of the caliphal embassy has usually been seen as an attempt by Moqtader and his strongly Sunnite advisers Ḥāmed b. ‘Abbās and ‘Alī b. and ‘Īsā to establish relations with the Muslim power of the Bulghar kings. Thus they would hope to counter the strongly Shi‘ite and Qarmatian trends at work within the caliphal lands and support the Samanid amirs of Transoxania, whose interest was to keep secure the trade routes across the steppes from Transoxania and ʿVārazm to the Volga (see A. Z. V. Togan, *Ibn Faḍlān's Reisebericht*, AKM 24/3, Leipzig, 1939, pp. xxff.). Recently, however, M. A. Shaban has stressed the economic motive behind the mission, stating that it was a response from Moqtader to an earlier joint approach from the Samanid vizier Abū ‘Abdallāh Jayhānī (q.v.) and the Bulghar king. The latter was eager to shake off the suzerainty exercised over his dominions by the *kāqān* of the Khazars on the lower Volga, and the other two parties were concerned at tapping the rich commerce in steppe and forest products (*Islamic History, a New Interpretation*. 2. A.D. 750-1055 [A.H. 132-448], Cambridge, 1976, pp.



148-51).

Whatever the motivating force behind the mission, Ebn Faẓlān's account of the trip across the steppes to the "King of the Ṣaqāleba" (who are here the Turkish Bulghars, not the Slavs) is of outstanding value for the history and ethnography of the western Eurasian steppes, with much unique information on such peoples as the Oghuz, Bashkirs, Pechenegs, Bulghars, Khazars, and Rus. Formerly the work was known only from excerpts scattered through various entries in Yāqūt's *Moʿjam al-boldān*, but a complete account of the embassy's outward journey was discovered at Mašhad in 1923 by Togan, as part of a geographical *maǧmūʿa* containing also Ebn al-Faḳīh Hamadānī's *Moḳtaṣar ketāb al-boldān* and the two *resālas* of Abū Dolaf al-Ḳazraǧī; he edited and translated the work and provided valuable commentary (op. cit.). The mission was headed by the eunuch Sūsan Rassī and left Baghdad in Ṣafar, 309/June, 921, proceeding via the Samanid court at Bokhara to that of the Afrighid Ḳvārazmšāhs. In spring, 309-10/922 it left Gorgānj for the arduous journey of seventy days through the steppes, across the Emba and Ural rivers to the Bulghar lands around the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers. There it was cordially received by the *elteber* or ruler of the Bulghars, Jaʿfar b. ʿAbdallāh; the date of its eventual return to Baghdad and the exact outcome of the mission are unknown. From Ebn Faẓlān we learn especially about the nomadic Oghuz, who were to play such a part in the history of Iran and the Islamic east a century or so later under the leadership of the Saljuqs; at this time they were still wholly pagan and at a very low cultural level. The Bulghars, however, were partly sedentarized and affected by Islam and its culture, though a substantial proportion of them still adhered to shamanism. There is further useful information about the volume and nature of the trade circulating between the Volga basin and Muslim Central Asia. Above all it involved furs from the more northerly forest zones of Russia and Siberia; the prosperity of the Bulghar state, strategically situated as it was for funneling the trade towards the Islamic lands, was essentially based on this commerce.



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Another tr. is M. Canard, “La relation du voyage d’Ibn Fadlan chez les Bulgares de la Volga,” *Annales de l’Institut d’Etudes Orientales* (Algiers) 16, 1958, pp. 41-146 (repr. in *Miscellanea orientalia*, London, 1973).

For older literature and discussions of the text, see “Ibn Faḍlān,” *ET*² III, p. 759.