

Vikings and the Fur Trade: Exchange and Autonomy beyond Western Europe

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Introduction

Trade within the Viking world is often ambiguous at best and near impossible to decipher at its worst. Raiding and trading can be applied to the exact same activity depending upon the perspective from which the story is told. With the addition of scholarly phrases such as “misappropriation of wealth” as a stand in for stealing it can be difficult to discern what activities fell under which categories. Trading furs, coins, and other goods could turn into plunder if the terms were not agreeable to both parties or the focus of the narrative wanted to frame the Viking negatively. Within the Viking world, furs are an excellent method by which to examine the ways Vikings interacted with each other and those outside of Scandinavia such as the Franks and the Arabs. Many furs originated from Rus’, yet because modern Viking scholarship focuses mostly on Scandinavia and interactions with the British Isles and modern-day France and Germany, Rus’ is often forgone in the discussion. Therefore, it is important to reinsert Rus’ back into the discussion of the Viking fur trade in order to show the connections the Vikings had outside of western Europe.

Often the common narrative proposed by modern European scholars frames the Vikings as a spontaneous occurrence with little context and reason for their appearance within the sources. Gwyn Jones is a perfect example of such scholarship. According to him the first Viking raid in 793 came “as a bolt from the blue” to not only the people at Lindisfarne but also those charged with chronicling the events such as Alcuin. Within a span of five years the Vikings enter the narrative and swiftly plunder all along the British Isles.¹

It can be seen that the Vikings were in fact interacting with and part of the lives and cultures of western Europeans long before the Viking age began. During the late Roman period Scandinavians from modern day Denmark and Sweden were serving in the imperial army.² There is evidence of Roman swords, pottery, and other material culture that point to Roman-Scandinavian ties predating the eighth century.³ As the Viking Age progresses ties of trade begin to evolve. The Viking economy as it relates to Europe, and specifically the economy of Viking Rus’ is often overlooked as a significant actor within the greater medieval economy. Yet, evidence shows that not only were the Rus’ members of the economy by exchanging goods from abroad, they were active participants. Viking Rus’ used their geographic position and natural resources as a method of creating significant and independent ties to western Europe and the Arab world via long-distance trade. This can be seen through the use of furs as a form of tribute or tax, products of long-distance trade, and establishment of individual trading posts.

The medieval European economy is often discussed in terms of continental western Europe and places where western traders could easily access and sell their goods such as Birka or Constantinople. This is most clearly seen in Michael McCormick’s monolithic *Origins of the European Economy*.⁴ McCormick attempts to map how the European world emerged from Roman antiquity and transitioned into the economy of the Carolingian empire. His focus is on the Mediterranean Sea and the economies that emerged as a result of it by the beginning of the tenth century. Apart from one

chapter, most mentions of Rus' or eastern Europe are made in passing, and often in relation to Slavic groups and their interactions with western trading centers. This aids in creating the image of the "northern arc" which was a "web of exchange" that linked the Frankish empire in the west with the Muslim caliphate in the east. Due to the northern arc's notoriety as a land corridor it, according to McCormick, calls for the "least comment."⁵

The one chapter that McCormick devotes to trade between the Arab and Byzantine world and western Europe is framed in terms of the Carolingian empire and the difficulties placed upon merchants arriving over the Alps from the Arab peninsula.⁶ He continues framing trade from Russian posts such as Staraiia Ladoga and Beloozero in terms of a northern route the Franks were able to take in order for their goods to reach a final destination of modern day Iraq and Iran.⁷ Although the Arab world was vital in its role in establishing economic ties with Rus', it is also overlooked in favor of how these ties benefited the Carolingian empire.

Historiography

Gwyn Jones, a prominent Viking historian, tends to mitigate Rus' in favor of Scandinavia. In reference to Rus' interactions with Byzantium and the Arab caliphate he says the two powers never interacted with Rus' "save the occasional excesses of [their] impudence."⁸ This seems to imply that Rus' was isolated from the rest of the world unless they were acting particularly savage, a view he articulates earlier on in his work. He goes on to mention important routes from Lake Ladoga but claims these connections were made as a result of "Swedish and Finish initiative" rather than any sort of mutual creation of economic ties.

Janet Martin published *Treasure of the Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and its Significance for Medieval Russia* two years after Jones published *A History of the Vikings*. Martin is a key voice in the discussion of the fur trade in Rus' because she desires to "substantiate the existence of a relationship" between political and economic factors in Rus' and their connection abroad.⁹ Instead of mitigating the role of Rus' in trade, Martin strives to demonstrate how the fur trade had a "considerable impact on the political development of the region."¹⁰ This is where my

work with the fur trade began. Her work aided me in finding a wide variety of primary sources that give details about the fur trade in Rus' and how it connected abroad.

The foundation upon which many modern studies of Rus' are built stem from the work of Thomas S. Noonan. He was a professor of Russian history at the University of Minnesota where he strived to have a balanced curriculum during a time of high tensions with the Soviet Union.¹¹ From there Noonan utilized literary, archeological, and numismatic sources to create a history of Russia. As a result of his desire to incorporate many types of evidence into his histories there are many opportunities to follow in his footsteps in any number of fields. Within the context of Viking Rus' Noonan frames the Viking settlement as having happened before the Viking age by "several hundred years."¹² He also supports the idea the Staraiia Ladoga was independently trading with both Scandinavia and the Arab world by tracing archeological numismatic evidence in the form of dirhams.¹³

Although many students and scholars alike wish to focus on Scandinavia when discussing the Viking economy, it is important to recognize the simultaneously vast array and narrow sliver of scholarship currently produced on Rus'. Therefore, whenever possible it is important to incorporate Rus' into Viking discussions because it offers a new perspective and offers a counterbalance to many western European centric sources.

Primary source discussion

Rus' did not exist in a vacuum from the rest of Europe and the world. In fact, we see that the Rusians were trading with a wide variety of people over a long period of time. Two great examples of this come from Arab sources. Mas' ūdī was an important Arab historian who chronicled the types of furs that were traded along the Volga river in 956. Mas' ūdī notes that: "pelts of black foxes were exported from Burtās [Turkish people along the Don river.]" He goes on further to say that black furs were often exported north and then on to the Franks and Spain. This means that as early as the mid tenth century we are already seeing the reaches of the fur trade extending into Europe and beyond.¹⁴ Superficially, this may seem to support the theory of the "northern route" as a method of transferring

goods from the Arab world to the Carolingian empire during the ninth and tenth century. However, with additional evidence it is seen that the trading posts acted as independent centers of economic exchange, not simply stops along a larger route.

The reverse can also be seen when merchants from Rus' went to market. They brought highly sought after and valuable goods such as sable and black fox furs to Turkic markets, according to Ibn Fadlan.¹⁵ Additionally, we see a scholar from Al-Andalus, Abū Hāmid al-Gharnātī, in the late eleventh century traveling along the Mediterranean and into the land of the Khazars, Turks, and Arabs. Here he extols the beaver furs from Arū, which is the region of the northern Volga River.¹⁶ This is showing the independent interactions of Arabs and Rus' rather than portraying Rus' as a stopping point along a longer route to western Europe and the Franks. Furthermore, these entries span about a century giving credence to established trading routes and purposeful interactions rather than happenstance. Mas' ūdī's entry in combination with Abū Hāmid create an image of an intentional connection between Rus' and the Arab world that spans and evolves over at least a century.

Furs became a luxury and highly sought-after item in the Arab world during the ninth and tenth century.¹⁷ As a result, Arab sources supply a large portion of primary evidence relating to the fur trade with Rus'. However, that is not the only primary source containing information about the fur trade during the Viking age. The Icelandic sagas provide information on both trade routes in general and the fur trade specifically.

After Scandinavians settled in Rus' they maintained ties back to Scandinavia as seen by the stays of Olaf Trygvason, St Olaf, and Harald of Norway's stay in Russian courts.¹⁸ This connection between Rus' and Scandinavia was forged independently of other connections between the Franks and Muslims. In addition to these political ties there are trade ties seen during the tenth and eleventh centuries with Viking ships sailing to Novgorod.¹⁹ The sagas, specifically *Heimskringla*, make several mentions of merchants and Rus'. In one instance ships from Sweden were found to be sailing from Gotland to Ladoga during the summer months.²⁰ In addition we see Russian merchants in

Norway because Sigvat, a bard, is able to inquire as to the health of Magnus Olafson who had been living in the court of Yaroslav.²¹

By the tenth century Scandinavian merchants were traveling to Novgorod to purchase silver coins, Byzantine, and Arab goods along with Russian jewelry.²² In return Scandinavians brought products from all over Europe that could be used in daily life in Rus' such as wool, pottery, salt, and weapons. Scandinavian merchants were also willing to travel long distances, including to Rus', in order to obtain furs. This shows that the Rus' were facilitating trade and had buyers of fur come to Rus' for the purchase of furs, not just Byzantine and Arab products. The *Saga of St. Olaf* has several other mentions of specifically trading with Rus'. Tore went to Bjarmaland and bought furs including those of sable and fox.²³ Although the precise location of Bjarmia has not been confirmed it is seen in this tale that Scandinavian merchants were willing to travel great distances to trade. That means the fur trade between Rus' and Scandinavia is well within the realm of possibility in eleventh century Europe.

The sagas serve two purposes. First, the sagas substantiate the existence of independent connections and trade routes between Scandinavia and Rus'. Secondly, pertaining specifically to the fur trade, we see through the sagas that Rus' was an independent agent actively participating in the trade route. They facilitated trade of their own domestic goods, furs among other things, in addition to selling some Arab goods as a way to obtain items that were more useful for day-to-day life in Rus'.

The third literary source in which trade is clearly outlined is the *Povst' Vremennykh Let* (PVL) or Russian Primary Chronicle. A trade route was clearly outlined in the PVL as a method of transporting goods from Rome, the Greeks, through Constantinople, and up the Volga.²⁴ From the perspective of Rus', furs and trade are often seen as methods of collecting or paying taxes and tribute. Within the early days of the Scandinavian settlement, Igor sends a Greek envoy home with "furs, slaves, and wax" after creating a treaty.²⁵ Olga refuses a tribute of "honey and furs" in favor of birds with flammable cloth that aided in burning a Derevlian camp.²⁶ In addition, after Olga refuses the betrothal of the Greek Emperor she offers to send him furs only

on the condition that he spend as much time in Rus' with her as she had with him in Constantinople. The use of furs as a tool in negotiations shows its value in medieval Rus'. Without furs as a natural resource, Rus' would lose a part of their agency and ability to trade independently with Franks, Greeks, and Arabs alike. However, because furs were so prevalent from the ninth throughout the twelfth century we instead see Rus' manipulating their natural resources to their own benefit.

Although literary sources comprise a bulk of the information known about the fur trade, archaeology serves as another type of evidence to support its existence and success. Direct archeological evidence is difficult to obtain simply because fur and various textiles will naturally decay. However, in lieu of having archeological evidence of fur there are tangential objects that can be used instead. There are clasps for the bags that held the fur, evidence of trading posts, routes, and potentially of the traders themselves. There are also a multitude of numismatics evidence which is outside the scope of this paper.²⁷ Merchants traveled to Rus' in order to buy and sell goods since these markets held valuable items acquired from long-distance trade with Europe, Scandinavia, and the caliphate. As a result of these proxy examples of material evidence, a picture of the fur route begins to emerge with Rus' at the epicenter.

In addition, osteological remains of wild animals used for their fur exist in some small rural trading pockets. A great quantity of the animal remains found at Minino are from the fur trade rather than domesticated animals. The bones constitute a large portion of the overall materials excavated from Minino.²⁸ This leads one to believe that trapping and the fur trade were central to this particular rural settlement. When this evidence is found in the same layer as coins and other markers of exchange and commerce it becomes difficult to dismiss rural settlements as participants in long-distance trade independent from urban centers such as Novgorod.²⁹

As a result of furs being traded both to and from Rus', these trading posts became the middleman in deals between Scandinavians and Byzantines or Muslims. Coins from the caliphate found their way into Scandinavian cities like Birka

and Hedby via Rusian routes. It is important to note that Rus' was not simply another stop on the route from one place to another but rather facilitators of trade with each group independently. There were obviously easier ways to exchange goods from the caliphate to the continent. Yet, it was as a result of specific connections that we see traders routing themselves through Novgorod, Staraiia Ladoga, and Beloozero. These connections were created as a result of favorable political ties with individuals present at each of the locations independent on each other.³⁰

Secondary Source Discussion

The problem faced by scholars examining trade in medieval Rus' is the common perception that trade was engaged by a select few in urban settlements while individuals in more rural settlements were isolated from trade.³¹ In Jämtland, rural settings were found to be centers of economic ties without being dependent upon larger urban settings to support them economically or politically.³² Taking the conclusions of the case and applying them to other areas we can see that in the western Viking world it is possible for a rural area to be removed from urban settings but still engage in buying and selling goods, transactions, and using metal as a means of monetary exchange. Furthermore, the individuals participating in this type of trade were not local elite who formed a monopoly on the trade but rather what moderns would understand to be a middle class. Connections to rural settlements were often framed in terms of natural goods being exchanged as a form of tax collection.³³ Primary source evidence from both the PVL and Ibn Fadlan confirm that furs were used for this purpose. Therefore, long-distance trade automatically excluded peoples not within the urban city network. Yet, the Jämtland case in addition to archeological finds of rural graves with women's metal ornaments and various imported goods points to evidence of the fur trade in these isolated areas.³⁴ Other examples include rural settlements along the Volga River where excavations have uncovered dirhams, denarii, and balance-weights.³⁵ This points to these rural Volga River settlements engaging with long-distance trade independently of the urban centers. Two settlements worthy of note are

Beloozero and Minino.

Beloozero is the region surrounding Lake Beloe, part of the Volga and Northern Dvina river systems. Beloozero most prominently enters the narrative in the PVL under the year 1071 in which pelts are contentiously collected as a tax payment.³⁶ Archeological evidence has uncovered tools used for hunting as well as an unusually high concentration of beaver bones. These deposits were dispersed evenly among the layers meaning that these goods were persistent at this site over a period of time.³⁷ This coupled with the metal ornaments and imports mentioned early and also western European coins create a picture of high levels of trade in this very isolated region. This means that Beloozero was a rural community in Rus' that actively engaged with trade not only with Scandinavians but also other western Europeans.

This is seen even more at the Minino sites; located off Lake Kubenskoe in the same river system as Beloozero. The excavation of Minino has uncovered material evidence only available to the people of Minino through long-distance trade. Materials found include glass beads rivaling the number found at Birka, Byzantine glass vessels, balance weights, pottery of Kievan and Bulgarian origin, western European coins from Frisia and Germany, and everyday items such as jewelry, combs, and knives.³⁸ The evidence can be found in layers that begin in the eleventh century and span through the thirteenth century.³⁹ The composition and quantity of material evidence, points overwhelmingly to foreign origins, meaning that these items could not have been deposited in Minino coincidentally.⁴⁰ Instead, the material evidence present shows that the people of Minino were creating economic ties outside of Rus' and served as a center of trade between Byzantine and western European merchants. The tradesmen who settled Minino were a result of the fur trade. The bones of wild animals compose around 75 percent of the total animal bones uncovered. Most of these animals were fur-bearing animals such as beaver, squirrel, and marten with a significant uptick in squirrel bones towards the thirteenth century as a result of overhunting animals with more valuable furs.⁴¹ This shows that Minino was an important link in the system of medieval trade because they were

not only hosting a wide variety of imported goods but were also a source of unique exports in the form of furs. In addition, because the goods are found over a long period of time it can be concluded that Minino existed as a trading center for enough time to become a well-known trading post.

It is suggested that in order to become an established trading post institutionalized protection had to exist for the all parties. Otherwise, without this protection neither party would feel comfortable enough bringing valuable goods through uncertain terrain.⁴² Although, in some ways it was because of the uncertain terrain that trade was possible. Being off the tradition path of trade routes offered some protection to those willing to bring their wears to market. It is upon these protections and feelings of mutual safety that trade in Rus' was able to persist in small groupings like Beloozero and Minino over a long period of time. These small rural trading centers served as an important link politically and economically between Scandinavians, Arabs, Franks, and other Europeans. Without these small trading posts valuable items may have never been traded or would have been forced to be routed through larger urban settlements. However, that is not to discount the more urban settlements like Birka and Novgorod. These larger urban settlements are important for trade because they serve as hubs for a large group of people rather than a small but dedicated group of merchants that would make the journey to places like Staraiia Ladoga year after year.

Furthering the connection between rural settlements and long-distance trade, archeological evidence at Birka shows connections to sites such as Staraiia Ladoga.⁴³ Another point of discussion that is important to mention is ties between Birka and Staraiia Ladoga during the late eighth and early ninth century. There have been dirhams found in the early layers at both locations that show a progression of goods from one location to another. Arab dirhams have been found in a route to Birka while Frankish coins have been found in bottom layers at Staraiia Ladoga. This would seem like evidence to support the northern route theory proposed by McCormick and many others. However, finding coins that link these two locations is secondary to the fact that these two locations were originally linked in order to exchange raw material goods such as furs, walrus

tusks, amber, and slaves.⁴⁴ This goes to disprove the existence of the northern route since both locations traded with the other for the explicit purpose of using the materials each had to offer rather than using the locations as simply a point of exchange to get their goods to either the Franks or the Arabs.⁴⁵ Although larger settlements such as Novgorod and Kiev are important when discussing trade in Rus', within the scope of this paper they are too vast of locations to properly discuss fully.

Conclusion

The idea of the northern route is shaped by a limited view of Rus'. Rather than looking at individual settlements some scholars saw patterns of goods moving from east to west via Rus' and assumed Rus' was simply another stop of the trade route rather than a hub. Yet in Beloozero, Minino, and Staraja Ladoga evidence shows that the tradesmen and merchants at each of these settlements were in fact facilitators of their own long-distance trade. These trade connections opened up other opportunities to form political ties.

For modern scholars the presence of individual independent trading posts in medieval Rus' points to greater participation in the European economy than is often recognized. Scholars wish to ascribe both specific settlements in Rus' and Rus' as whole to being influenced by either the Scandinavians, the Franks, or the Arabs depending upon the source. But rather Rus' served as an independent player in long-distance trade for their own economic benefit and were not acted upon by outside pressures. Although we see evidence of furs being used to pay or collect taxes and tribute this was in fact a very small portion of the role of furs. Instead furs served as a means in which to place Rus' within the middle of trade between the Arab world and western Europe, both of which had a high demand for furs. Furthermore, merchants in Rus' used the coins, beads, weaponry, and other items received in trade from one region to engage with trade from another region. In this way they became a hub of the trade using their own resources to facilitate more trade rather than a thoroughfare between two powers.

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