Vikings in al-Andalus

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The history of the Vikings is rich and far-reaching, yet the information available to and written by scholars is often deceptively brief which belies just how great their impact. One such instance occurs in *The Historical Atlas of the Vikings*. Author John Haywood condenses information on Vikings in Iberia into two pages. He writes that Vikings attacked Spain in the ninth century before sailing further into the Mediterranean.[1] At the time, modern-day Spain and Portugal did not exist – a handful of Christian kingdoms and more politically dominant Muslim caliphates comprised the landscape of the Iberian Peninsula, referred to then as al-Andalus. Haywood then makes the claim that the raiding of the Iberian Peninsula and the greater Mediterranean region cost too much in lives and resources, so the Vikings would only rarely raid Spain in the future.[2] Part of this brevity could be explained by the unavailability of or inaccessibility of information. Whatever the reason, it is quite evident that the presence of Viking raiders in Iberia was established early.

The Vikings are often viewed as pillagers and marauders based upon documentation about them in many accounts. However, far from randomly expanding and attacking, the Vikings often left their homeland in search of material gain, an increase in reputation and new places to settle. Often, the determining factors were the economic or political situation that attracted the attention of the Vikings.

It seems as though the economic and political situation in al-Andalus attracted the Vikings, even as the political climate gradually changed enough to discourage raiding. Both Latin and Arabic sources offer information in favor of this possibility, even though the two types are different in style and intent, and archaeological evidence is nonexistent. Historian Ann Christys notes that, aside from fortifications that may have been a response to Viking activity, there is no physical evidence of Viking raids or settlement in al-Andalus.[3] In addition, there is little archaeological data with which to determine the wealth of cities and mosques in al-Andalus[4] – this would have been the biggest attraction for Vikings searching either for plunder or trading opportunities.

The information available to scholars today, as well as the documentation of Viking exploits elsewhere in medieval Europe, presents an interesting prospect. It is this prospect and patterns of activity elsewhere that favors the possibility of Viking raiders being present in the Iberian Peninsula. The Vikings likely possessed knowledge of al-Andalus because of its dealings with other states, like the Franks, in medieval Europe. If the Vikings possessed the knowledge of a region that was ripe with wealth and was politically vulnerable, the parts of their history that are available indicate the likelihood that they then would have charted a course for al-Andalus because of the opportunities for material gain that the region represented – natural resources facilitated by easy travel, material goods, and slaves. While this argument would present the easiest case scenario, the historical record is not complete, nor is it in agreement across traditions. As a result, this discrepancy makes the question of Viking presence in Iberia difficult to establish with any real definitiveness.

It is worth noting that there are perceptible differences between Islamic primary sources and Christian primary sources in both style, intent, and accessibility. The first centuries of Islamic thought were chronicled through an oral tradition known as *hadith*, a collection of anecdotes or narratives prefaced by an *isnad*, or chain of oral sources. It is this tradition that inspired the primary sources which inform today's historian about al-Andalus. As opposed to the Christian sources from the same time, it is sometimes beneficial

to trace the origins of the Islamic sources making it easier to determine the accuracy and potential bias of a given account. The Islamic sources from which these accounts received their information varied - war reports, correspondence between monarchs, old stories and oral traditions, and even the author's personal experiences could be cited.[5] Largely regarded as primary sources, or based on primary sources, the Islamic tradition is largely accepted as "the record" on al-Andalus. Because these sources drew on previous compilations of information, sometimes from other parts of the Islamic world, opinions from outside al-Andalus and many different motives may exist in one source.[6] Thus these amalgamated sources are often the best, if not the only, record available. Frequently this amalgamation is a result of lost copies or mistranslations, both of which preclude historians' access to the earlier works cited in one source. Because few or no original sources have survived, historians are limited in their ability to establish the authenticity of the information provided. Other factors which impact the survival of such records include, but are not limited to geography, religion, and politics.

While the Muslim sources might be the best record historians have regarding the presence of the Vikings in Iberia, they are few in number and total record. The survival rate of Islamic sources in their entirety compared to those of Christian sources is very low – later medieval conquests, conversions, and expulsions ensured that many non-Latin sources in the Iberian Peninsula would disappear.[7] To compound the issue, the sources that offer information on Vikings in al-Andalus are set down much later after the event described.[8] This is because the information on the Vikings in those sources are derived from earlier accounts that either no longer exist in their entirety or no longer exist at all. Thus, historians cannot assess the original documents for veracity or "absent" information in subsequent accounts.

A final hurdle that appears in the study of these sources is a language barrier. Most of these compiled accounts were penned in Arabic, which according to historian Ann Christys might prove "A bridge too far for scholars of the Viking Age."[9] In the academic field devoted to the Viking Age, where a significant amount of emphasis rests on Scandinavia and Western Europe, translations of Islamic sources into languages like English or even Spanish are few in number.[10] The lack of readily available translators familiar with or interested in translating Arabic at the time and a language that appears somewhat removed from the modern-day study of the Vikings also contribute to the difficulty of translation.

Difficulties with the Islamic tradition often cause historians to examine the Christian account of events of the time. While Christian sources on al-Andalus and the Vikings do not present the same problems as Islamic sources, they still have complications. In the case of Christian sources, entries are brief and very concise, which may reflect attitudes at the time that the end of the world was near.[11] Authors of the medieval era often expressed this attitude in their writing, particularly following a disastrous natural event or heavy loss in battle – losses to "heathen" Vikings were doubly bad. Compared to the Islamic sources, the intent of the Christian sources is clearer. Most were written specifically under commission by a patron, and as such sources may have a political agenda that mixed historical details with fictional stories via addition, omission, and perhaps invention.[12] As such, there is no foolproof way to distinguish the factual details from the embellished ones in the Christian tradition. Furthermore, Christian sources generally only focus on one specific area or family. Thus, the patronage of a wealthy Christian often colored the early records or accounts for a number of reasons. The interest in the Iberian Peninsula does not appear to have been of great concern to the Christians at the time and so, as a result, most of the general history written about al-Andalus as one region was authored by Islamic scholars.[13]

It is important to note that Christian and Islamic sources do have one significant concern in common. There is not enough archaeological data with which to corroborate the narratives offered by the primary sources available. For example, the only information on the size, layout, and affluence of the city of Cordoba – the seat of government for the caliphate of the same name in al-Andalus – exists only in Islamic primary sources. Ann Christys points out that the description of the mosque built in Cordoba includes details that were also used to describe the mosque in Damascus, the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate.[14] Perhaps the similarity in each description could be construed as simple elaboration where there was less information than desirable on the later mosque built in Cordoba. However, this cannot be proved or disproved because succeeding generations of residents,

rapid development and a lack of earlier excavations make it difficult for any future archaeology to find anything.[15] Thus, in the absence of archaeological evidence historians are forced to rely on other sources to inform their opinions about significant historical events.

Even though several possible reasons for the Viking presence in al-Andalus are clearly surmised, there is evidence that al-Andalus was part of the wider political scene of medieval Europe, which may have roused the Vikings' awareness of them. This possibility is one that lends credibility to the belief that the Vikings had an early presence in Iberia because it is consistent with other places and reasons where historians document that the Vikings exerted their influence. The more traditional focus of Viking scholars is on Western medieval Europe, from which many sources originate that offer details on interactions between al-Andalus and Western kingdoms like those of the Franks. For example, John Wreglesworth writes that the Franks were involved in the affairs of al-Andalus between 796-798 CE – Frankish rulers Charlemagne and Louis negotiated with al-Andalus and Christian Spain.[16] The Christian ruler of Asturia, King Alfonso, dispatched an embassy to Toulouse, which Wreglesworth places around 795 CE, a time when the Asturian kingdom experienced frequent attacks from forces of al-Andalus.[17] This involvement occurs a hundred years before the first recording of Viking activity in al-Andalus, indicating that al-Andalus was a part of the larger political world – a world that clearly included the Vikings.

That others' presence is noted in al-Andalus indicates that the Iberian region was not cut off from the influence of outsiders. But, the Christian Franks did not limit their peaceful dealings to Christian Spain alone. Recorded in the year 847 in the *Annals of St-Bertin*, "Envoys of 'Abd al-Rahman king of the Saracens came from Cordoba in Spain to Charles to seek a peace and draw up a formal treaty."[18] And in the year 858, "A certain monk…returned from Cordoba in Spain bearing with him the bodies of the blessed martyrs George the Deacon and Aurelius."[19] The monk had to have gained access to these martyrs' remains and passage into and out of Cordoba in some way. This serves as another example of the Franks negotiating with those in power in al-Andalus. But the Franks were not the only ones interacting with al-Andalus.

Additionally, there is also evidence of a relationship between al-Andalus and the Eastern European medieval world. For example, the scholar Istakhri – whose name is indicative of Persian origin – compiled the "Book of Roads and Kingdoms" around 951. In this work, Istakhri describes the land of the Khazars, a semi-nomadic people who settled territories along the Volga and Don rivers and near the Khazar (Caspian) Sea.[20] He notes the presence of Christians, Muslims and Jews in Khazar lands, going on to say that the societies' slaves are "idol worshippers" because the three monotheistic religions are prohibited from enslaving one another.[21] This source establishes that the wider medieval Islamic world was familiar with eastern Europe even if it does not specifically name with which peoples.

As another example, The Khazar correspondence establishes a relationship more specifically between al-Andalus and the Khazars. The correspondence is an exchange of letters between Cordoban statesman Hasdai ibn Shaprut and King Joseph of Khazaria. The letter from Hasdai, penned by his secretary, has been confirmed as authentic – the mention of a diplomatic visit from the Khazars in 954 and the fact that Hasdai served the Caliph Abd-al Rahman until his death in 961 places the time of the letter's creation between 954 and 961.[22] While the authenticity of King Joseph's reply has been debated, it is the authentic letter from the Cordoban Caliphate to the Khazars that demonstrates al-Andalus' knowledge of the world beyond its borders. And the states of eastern Europe with which al-Andalus interacted were tied through trade to the Vikings. As an example, the Khazars settled land that would have put them on the route to the Byzantine Empire and the greater Islamic world, both of whom traded with Vikings. Word of al-Andalus may have reached Viking raiders through trade in Eastern Europe.

The trade routes established in the region appear well documented and involve some cordiality. The relationship between Christian Spain and Islamic al-Andalus is more complicated. There is a possibility Christian Spain and Islamic al-Andalus worked together on occasion, an example being the 713 Treaty of Tudmir – recorded in the Latin *Chronicle of 754* – in which the Umayyad invaders of al-Andalus promised freedom of worship and protection of the peaceful to Theodimir, described as a descendant of Visigothic ruler Witiza.[23] This indicates not only political changes due to conquests but the granting of "privileges" or

"rights" to the vanquished.

However, historians like Ann Christys point out that there is no firm evidence for the genuineness of the treaty.[24] Other more verifiable examples of compromise and statesmanship between Christian and Muslim governments in al-Andalus appear non-existent. The lack of cohesive diplomacy and collaboration between the two sides may have provided another layer of "common knowledge" to which the Vikings might have had access – this may be yet another reason Viking raiders might set their eye on al-Andalus. The region was divided along faith traditions and a distrust or dislike sprung from that reality.

In her own research, Christys observes that Christians living in al-Andalus did not lose their voice completely and several Latin accounts of their perceptions of al-Andalus have survived.[25] Thus, there is evidence of a cohesiveness, even if it was on the surface because these accounts are not entirely negative. Furthermore, she argues that the author of the *Chronicle of 754* expressed a typical Christian worldview – defeats at the hands of the Arabs were a punishment, a disaster the Christians of Spain had brought on themselves.[26] These early encounters were not unique in their outcome, nor were the sentiments about the wrath of God. Regardless of Christian expression, one thing remained consistent: the Christians did not accept being a conquered people well.

Christian Spain reacted negatively to Islamic dominance in later instances as well. For example, the Frankish retrieval of martyrs' remains as recorded in the *Annals of St-Bertin* were in response to the execution of forty-eight Christians in Cordoba for either blasphemy of or apostasy from Islam.[27] As a much later example of more blatant criticism, a Mozarabic (Arabic-Speaking) priest would pen "The False Teachings of Islam," and argue, "Your religion triumphed by the sword and coercion on the earth."[28] This resistance would continue throughout the Islamic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. This serves as yet another example of a politically divided al-Andalus, which might have been seen as an opportunity by Viking raiders.

Division along faith traditions in the Iberian region presented a perceived weakness based on the structure of the different religious groups and how they interacted with each other. Not only did Christian kingdoms exist beside Muslim caliphates in al-Andalus, but their societies in the region were not homogenous; evidence suggests that different ethnic and religious groups existed throughout the Iberian Peninsula regardless of whether the government in any given area was controlled by Christians or Muslims. For example, the local Caliphate of Córdoba (c. 750–1031 CE) began as a part of the larger Umayyad Caliphate (dissolved 750 CE), which encompassed many lands. This was reflected by the inhabitants and administrators of the Cordoban Caliphate – Egyptians, Syrians, and Berbers are mentioned as separate ethnicities in Islamic primary sources. Additionally, Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in al-Andalus for centuries. In the Caliphate of Cordoba, Jewish and Christian citizens enjoyed special protected status as *dhimmi* or "People of the Book" – although that protection did not necessarily equate to egalitarianism or impartiality.[29] In spite of generally accepted laws that allowed for difference of faith or ethnicity, the national identity was far from coalescing. Rather than raise tolerance, the different ethnic and religious groups that existed in the Caliphate of Cordoba created internal instability. This tension is documented by historians.

According to Hispanist Gabriel Jackson, twenty years rarely passed without a major military conflict or revolt.[30] As an example, chronicler 'Arīb ibn Sa'd offers short entries on what appears to be a year-round three-year campaign by cavalry leader Lubb idn Muhammad. In the chronicler's account, ibn Muhammad trekked through al-Andalus, capturing forts exhausting his army and forcing some of them to pay tribute.[31] The date of the capturing of the several forts, and therefore the existence of the forts, is recorded as occurring between 903 and 905 CE. Although no physical remains of these fortresses have been unearthed, the written source indicates at the least that fortifications functioned to keep order and prevent or impede internal insurrections – perhaps they could also guard against attacks from Viking raiders.

Such instability in the region would have presented an attractive perception of a region that was self-absorbed in local power struggles and thus was less vigilant to the outside attack. This condition was one that precipitated a Viking attack or expansion in other areas of the medieval world.

Perhaps the best source to shed light on the Vikings' knowledge of the Iberian Peninsula is Ibn Diyah's account of the Cordoban envoy al-Ghazal's journey to a Viking court. This account occurs during the time of known Viking activity in al-Andalus and

Christian Spain. The authenticity of the account has been questioned, with historians suggesting that it is a later fabrication based on al-Ghazal's recorded mission to Constantinople.[32]

But, according to Allen in his monograph of the account, "Scandinavian and English specialists of the Viking period are in general agreement in accepting the validity of the report of al-Ghazal's embassy to the north."[33] Rather than the authenticity of the source, the location of the "great island in the ocean with flowing streams" is debated more strenuously.[34]

Ibn Diyah constructed his account in the twelfth or thirteenth century from anecdotes of a ninth century Cordoban vizier who had cited al-Ghazal himself as his source of information.[35] In the source, Viking envoys came to 'Abd al-Rahman to ask for peace following a retreat from Seville and the loss of the commander of the Viking fleet.[36] Al-Ghazal, an ambassador in possession of "keenness of mind, quickness of wit, skill in repartee, courage and perseverance" was selected to journey with the Viking envoys to their king's court.[37] He spent twenty months in the Viking court entertaining the king and queen, accompanied by an interpreter, before returning to Cordoba.[38] Although there is no information to follow up on how well al-Ghazal was received or the political ramifications of such a visit, this diplomatic record indicates the Vikings were conscious of the system that governed al-Andalus. Also, this record cannot positively refute the suggestion that the Vikings knew of al-Andalus before the Moors knew of the Vikings.[39] Given the time constraint introduced by the first recorded Viking raid (844), and the suggested time frame of al-Ghazal's journey (844-845), the Vikings likely had prior knowledge of the terrain and politics of al-Andalus. This prior knowledge likely shaped their decision to raid al-Andalus. The Vikings planned an attack that indicated a familiarity with the landscape, the people, the wealth and the internal governing policies in place.

Several natural characteristics of al-Andalus may have helped create an attractive image for potential raiders or settlers of a land wealthy in resources. Food was one such resource and a highly prized one. According to Hispanist Gabriel Jackson, wheat was the basic food crop in al-Andalus and it was common for a grain surplus to occur.[40] Archaeology in the form of a soil analysis of Galicia in Northern Iberia supports the idea that the land was ideal for agriculture.[41] The area also cultivated several exportable goods. For example, olive oil, wine, and figs were noted as exports from Sagunto since at least the third century BC.[42] Iberia produced significant food sources consistently compared to other areas less able to produce these commodities and it formed the backbone of al-Andalus' economy. In fact, under the rule of the Moors, cultivation of crops like olives was more extensive than at any other point in Iberian history.[43] This agricultural system contributed to the foundation of trade, the basis of the rest of the economy in al-Andalus.

Ibn Khurradadhbih, author of the earliest surviving Arabic book of administrative geography, offers a terse note on the exports of al-Andalus and the Western Mediterranean:

> The goods that are exported… are Saqalib eunuchs and Roman, Frankish and Langobard slaves, and Roman and Andalusian slave girls, and beaver pelts and other furs, aromatics such as storax, and drugs such as mastic. From the sea floor near France comes the substance called *bussadh,* commonly known as coral.[44]

In addition to drawing the attention of Viking raiders and settlers, natural features of al-Andalus may have facilitated their goals. The western coast of al-Andalus was indented with creeks, bays, and inlets to the heart of the Iberian Peninsula. Thus water travel played an important role in the life of the region for friend and foe alike. Raiders with advanced maritime capability, like the Vikings, could navigate rivers like the Guadalquivir in small vessels in order to reach major cities like Cordoba.[45] The ease with which one could travel into areas of relative wealth and exit quickly was likely not lost on groups seeking to plunder.

Al-Andalus was likely known because it was situated on a prime trade route. Therefore, travelers from the north or east would sail past al-Andalus on their way to the Mediterranean – the Vikings may have done just that. This possibility is substantiated by a little archaeological data to corroborate that idea in the form of rune stones, or raised stones with runic inscriptions attributed to the Vikings. Two such stones exist in the Mediterranean, one in Florence, Italy and one in Pireus, Greece. However, neither have been dated to

the time of the first recorded raids by Vikings on al-Andalus. The Italian rune stone is dated between 1200-1300 CE, and offers no insight into its purpose or origin other than the inscription, "Andres made me."[46] The Greek rune stone does not have a confirmed date, although its partial inscription appears to commemorate "Valiant men."[47] Perhaps those honored with the inscription were a part of a raiding expedition or a trading caravan. The ease of accessing the interior of the country for the Vikings and its position on the way to the greater Mediterranean region would have made al-Andalus appealing as a possible territory for exploitation. Thus geography, political differences to outside regions and perceived wealth all likely contributed to the attraction of the Iberian Peninsula.

It is likely that the Vikings' introduction to the manufactured lure of al-Andalus may have begun with Islamic sources like *Futuh*, authored by an Egyptian scholar named Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam (d. 871 CE). The account credits a coastal garrison commander, Tariq ibn 'Amr, with crossing from Tangier into Spain and beginning the Moorish conquest of al-Andalus at 711 CE.[48] This process lasted several years. After the conquest, al-Andalus was initially considered a province of the Umayyad Caliphate – its power base rested in Syria, with Damascus serving as the capital. The most striking part of this excerpt from *Futuh* is the amount of detail paid to items looted during the conquest. For example, Tariq ibn 'Amr argues with a nephew of the Christian ruler Rodrigo over a debt payment – as payment, Tariq ibn 'Amr tore off the leg of a table, "Adorned with gold and jewels, the like of which had never been seen."[49] Other details include the seizure of carpets woven with gold thread and gold chains strung with rubies pearls and topaz.[50]

In addition to the anecdote about the table, there are other details of wealth unimaginable in al-Hakam's account. In another section of the account, Islamic invaders drained a bathing pool to find a cache of silver vessels.[51] Whether or not these descriptions are objectively true, stories of the spoils obtained in al-Andalus may have reached the Vikings because Al-Hakam's work stands as an example of the kind of circulatory information that would create a motive for raiders to train their sights on al-Andalus.

Due to the language barrier, it is likely that Viking envoys and informers throughout the continent would not have been able to read Arabic. But, they still could have gleaned information by word-of-mouth. Loot featured in other non-Islamic accounts, like the ninth century Frankish Annals of St-Bertin. According to that source, in the year 838 a fleet of Saracens – the term used to refer to Muslims – attacked Marseilles and "carried off all the nuns…all the males, both clergy and laymen…and took away with them en masse the treasures of Christ's churches."[52] This indicates that there is more than one possible draw in al-Andalus other than the presence of valuable decorative and trade goods.

Riches in the form of gold, jewels, silver and crops aside, another possible economic draw was slavery. In his piece, "Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era," author Fynn-Paul introduces the idea that medieval Europe was a slaving zone, a geographical area that fed the market demand of another society for slaves.[53] Fynn-Paul writes, "The eighth and ninth centuries were thus even more difficult for western Europeans than has been realized… demand for non-Islamic slaves encouraged non-Christians on all Latin Christendom, including Slavs, Arabs and Scandinavians, to raid the lands of their Christian neighbors in search of valuable human plunder."[54] Geographic location would have made al-Andalus a good gateway through which transport of non-Islamic slaves to the Islamic world could occur. Other historians support this idea of a unidirectional slave trade, with the Islamic world importing the majority of the slaves processed through al-Andalus.

Academics like Daniel Eisenberg posit that slavery was solely "an Andalusian phenomenon. The early Christian states could not afford to buy slaves."[55] This supports Fynn-Paul's idea that the demand was made for non-Islamic slaves by Islamic masters and mistresses. However, it is also acknowledged that scant information exists on the presence of slavery in al-Andalus.[56] Most of the evidence for this institution is from the eleventh century CE or later.[57] The information available does not shed light on the ethnic or religious identities of those enslaved.. However, Ibn Hawqal, successor to Istakhri and next compiler of "The Book of Roads and Kingdom," offers more detail when he writes in 988 that al-Andalus was well-known for its export of "slaves, boys and girls captured in France and Galicia, as well as eunuchs."[58] This is corroborated by Khurradadhbih's note on exports of the Western Mediterranean.[59] At best, the role of a slave trade in attracting Viking raiders to al-Andalus is

speculative. That speculation might have been just one of many reasons the Vikings traveled to the Iberian Peninsula.

When the Viking raids in the Iberian Peninsula first occurred in the ninth century, sources had much more to say on the topic than on diplomatic proceedings. The ninth century Frankish Annals of St-Bertin noted, "The Northmen…got to the south-western part of Spain, where they fought long and bitterly with the Saracens."[60] Thus the record indicates that these raids were not limited to one time, nor one place in al-Andalus. The chronicler Ibn Hayyan, credited with writing the most complete and reliable history of al-Andalus available to historians,[61] offered a detailed account of a Viking attack on Seville in 844. Referring to the Vikings in his account as *majus* – often used as a blanket term for any group of non-Muslims and meaning "fire worshippers"[62] – Hayyan writes that Vikings arrived, "ship after ship," and occupied Seville for seven days.[63] They killed the male inhabitants of Seville and enslaved women and children until reinforcements from the Caliphate of Cordoba arrived to fight them.[64] According to Hayyan, more than a thousand *majus* were killed and thirty of their ships destroyed in the final standoff with Islamic forces meant to drive them from Seville and the larger al-Andalus.[65] Although Hayyan's account is seen as the most reliable, no archaeological evidence – in this case, data could take the form of remains of ships or a mass grave – exists that can corroborate the event.

The sources available to today's historian along with what little archaeological evidence exists paint a shadowy yet complex picture of al-Andalus during the period of time in medieval history known as the Viking Age. In many accounts, more questions are presented than proofs. However, one thing is certain: ff Viking raiders obtained knowledge of the internal and external strife that both Christian and Muslim territories faced in al-Andalus, they might have perceived the first hint of opportunity. Sources – accounts like that of al-Ghazal's diplomatic visit to a Viking court – establish that the Vikings were aware of al-Andalus. Further investigation may have led them to discover that al-Andalus was ripe in natural resources, material goods, and slaves. Other sources detailing Viking raids on the peninsula and the rune stone in modern-day Italy may be seen as a confirmation that the Vikings did indeed take advantage of the situation in al-Andalus. Although the material whys of their voyages are speculative at best, it is safe to say that al-Andalus presented itself as an attractive target for seekers of wealth.

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