

*Fusion of Cultures in Tenth-Century Rus Rituals*¹

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It is a well-established thesis that Vikings in the East – labelled as Rus' in the contemporary sources – developed an identity of their own due to their merge with the local population of Eastern Europe. The interaction of these Scandinavians with the Slavic inhabitants of the region has long been noted; however less attention was paid to the relationship between Rus' and Eastern steppe nomadic tribes. This study aims to explore Rus-nomadic relationships from a cultural perspective by examining recorded Rus ritual traditions as reflections of an identity which contains not just Scandinavian or Slavic but also steppe nomadic elements. It will be argued that depending on the location of each group of Rus', their ritual traditions indicate different cultural impacts; let it be Slavic, Byzantine or even nomadic. By adapting to the local circumstances, Rus' could be, therefore, very diverse as their different groups were exposed to the mentioned influences to a varying degree.

Scandinavians, who had already begun to penetrate Eastern Europe via the waterways as early as the 8th century, were often referred to as Rus' in contemporary Latin, Arabic, Slavic and Byzantine sources. The cultural interactions between these Scandinavian intruders and the Slavs of Eastern Europe have been extensively studied; however, less attention has been given to their relationship with steppe nomadic groups, such as the various steppe-nomadic tribes that were also dwelling along the River Dnieper and the Volga, where the Rus merchants appeared with their goods. Based on the accounts of Arabic and Persian travellers, the Icelandic historian Thorir Jonson Hraundal has recently suggested that, on a cultural level, a differentiation should be made between a "Dnieper" and a "Volga" Rus community, since the Rus' along the Dnieper region were more integrated into the Slavic speaking population, whilst those along the Volga had dealt more closely with the local nomadic tribes. Hraundal illustrates the differences through the examination of a Rus ritual tradition as it was recorded by the Arab traveller, Ibn Fadlan, which con-

¹ This article was supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – University of Debrecen 'Lendület' Research Group 'Hungary in Medieval Europe'.

tains ritual elements borrowed from Turkic culture rather than Slavic.² Following up on this path, it will be postulated that two other Rus rituals also show potential Turkic elements, suggesting that the Turkic cultural impact might not have been confined solely to the areas which Arabic and Persian authors usually addressed, but was also influential, albeit to a lesser degree, on the Kievan Rus', where Scandinavian, Slavic and Turkic cultural elements likely manifested as a fusion. The parallels of recorded tenth-century Rus rituals suggest that the originally Scandinavian or Slavic practices have been greatly modified and distorted over time. As the Rus' began to merge with the local population of Eastern Europe, a new spiritual perception arose which could hardly be classified as distinctively Scandinavian or Slavic, especially if we add to this the regional variations that existed in the religious beliefs of both ethnic groups.³ While it is hard to identify the exact effect of this cultural mix on the religious perceptions of the pagan Rus' in general, this paper will propose that variants of the same practices might have existed in the Volga-Dnieper region. It will also attempt to explain the outstanding adaptability that the Rus' demonstrated in absorbing Slavic and Turkic elements into their ritual traditions.

Descriptions of early Rus rituals are sparse in our sources; even the few that are available are subject to debate regarding whether they depict a tradition more akin to Slavic or to Scandinavian culture. These include accounts of Rus' sacrifices and a funeral along the River Volga (by Ibn Fadlan), the cremation of hostages and dead warriors undertaken by the army of Prince Sviatoslav at the Battle of Dorostolon, and lastly, the sacrifices performed by Rus merchants on the island of Saint Gregory on their way to Constantinople.⁴ None of these

² T. J. Hraundal, "Integration and Disintegration: the 'Norse' in Descriptions of the Early Rus." In: *Norman Tradition and Transcultural Heritage. Exchange of Cultures in the 'Norman' Peripheries of Medieval Europe*, ed. S. Burkhardt, T. Foerster, Burlington 2013, 279–293; Idem, *The Rus in the Arabic sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity*. PhD dissertation, Centre for Medieval Studies, Bergen 2013; Idem, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus in Arabic Sources." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 10 (2014), 65–97.

³ A. Nordberg, "Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion," In: *More than Mythology. Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. C. Raudvere, J. P. Schjødt, Lund 2012, 119–51.; L. Slupecki, "Slavic religion," In: *The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*, ed. L. B. Christensen, O. Hammer, D. A. Warburton, Durham 2013, 339–58.

⁴ On the ethnic-religious background of the Rus in Ibn Fadlan's description, see: J. E. Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah." *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), 1–25.; W. Duczko, *Viking Rus. Studies on the presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*. The Northern World Series 12, Leiden–Boston 2004, 138; regarding the sacrifice of Saint Gregory island as Scandinavian, see: J. Simpson, *Everyday life in the Viking Age*. London–New York 1967, 180; for a more nuanced view: D. Obolensky, "The Byzantine Sources on the Scandinavians in Eastern Europe," In: *The Byzantine Inheritance of Eastern Europe*. ed. D. Obolensky, London 1982, 158; taking the Dorostolon and Saint Gregory island sacrifices as pure Slavic, see: E. R. Luján,

rituals were recorded by the Rus' themselves but were instead documented by outsiders: Ibn Fadlan was an Arab, while the authors of the latter two rituals were Byzantines: Leo the Deacon, and possibly someone from the court of the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (945–959). This naturally presents obstacles when one tries to reconstruct Pre-Christian practices, since the authors, not being natives of the culture they describe, could have misunderstood and misinterpreted the scene, or perhaps simply adjusted the information to fit the terminology of their own religious world (Ibn Fadlan, for instance, used an interpreter). However, parallels from different sources might hint at the cultural background of the different practices, strengthening the relative authenticity of the three sources. All three rituals occurred at roughly the same period in history, in a 50-year phase (922–971), and while they partly reflect uniformity, they also contain considerable differences, which might suggest that we are dealing with variants of rituals—including rites and elements adopted from diverse cultural backgrounds. These rituals likely represent a tradition which borrowed both physical and mental elements from not only Scandinavian and Slavic, but also Turkic cultures.

The latter is a dangerously broad term, as the Turkic tribes could have been just as different from each other as they were from the Vikings of the North or the miscellaneous groups of Rus' operating in the area. In addition, Turkic cultures were also subject to change, and were exposed to Muslim and, in certain cases, Jewish or Byzantine influences. What we find in Eastern Europe at this point is a cultural melting pot, and thus clear parallels of certain practices from specified tribes are almost impossible to discern. Bearing these difficulties in mind, the following discussion only aims to pinpoint certain tendencies rather than clear-cut cultural transfers.

The best-known and most thoroughly researched account of Rus rituals was written by Ibn Fadlan, an Arab traveller and diplomat, who took a mission in 922 from the Abbasid Caliphate to the land of the Volga Bulgars, where he witnessed various rituals of the people called Rus'.⁵ The rituals he observed could be roughly summarised as follows: upon their arrival to the Volga, the Rus' sacrifice food and drinks to wooden idols, one idol being set up on a pole and representing a main deity, with the others personifying smaller deities. The reason for the sacrifice is to assure successful trading with future merchants. Upon finishing commercial business, they honour the idols with another offering of sheep or cows, and tie the heads of the slaughtered animals to the wooden poles. In addition, Ibn Fadlan describes the funerary ritual of an eminent Rus chieftain. After his death, the body of the chieftain is kept in a tent for ten days, while his fitting funerary garments are prepared. The Rus burying

"Procopius De bello Gothico III 38. 17–23.: a description of ritual pagan Slavic slayings?" *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 11 (2008), 105–112.

⁵ For a list of editions and general works, see: M. Canard, "Ibn Fadlān," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Vol. 3., ed. B. Lewis, V. L. Ménage, Ch. Pellat, J. Schacht, London 1971, 759.

community then fill up a boat with riches – treasures, weapons, jewellery, food and drink – and sacrifice animals (horses, cows, a dog, a cock and a hen) together with a slave girl who volunteered to follow her master into a place known as “Paradise”. The girl is used sexually by the followers or relatives of the chieftain and, after being lifted between a door-frame multiple times, is stabbed by a woman called the “Angel of Death”, who also recites a text about the re-union of family members in the afterlife. After loading the ship up with possessions, gifts, sacrificial animals and the girl’s body, the Rus’ finally cremate the boat on the water.⁶

The accounts of Arabic travellers often served state purposes and consequently are remarkable historical sources regarding the period in question. Ibn Fadlan’s report is, quite simply, the best written record we possess about early Rus funerary rituals, and it has been taken as an authentic source describing Scandinavian habits, inasmuch as its details were used to illuminate rituals in even in Scandinavia.⁷ It is true that many elements of the ritual seem to have parallels with Scandinavian habits; the ship, the cremation, the grave goods (especially weapons), the animal and human sacrifices.

However, it has long been acknowledged that some of the details of the ritual cannot be matched with any known Scandinavian examples, but should be sought in a Volga Turkic or Khazar cultural milieu.⁸ Physical evidence pointing towards the East includes the basil leaves used to embalm the dead,⁹ and the buttons (used on the silk shirt) of the Rus chieftain,¹⁰ none of which could have been brought from Scandinavia. Besides the practicalities, certain rites were not fully compatible with their Scandinavian counterparts. For instance, it is problematic to correlate, as some have attempted, the crone known as “Angel of Death” with the Valkyries of Norse mythology, or the afterlife called “Paradise” with Valhalla, the hall of dead warriors where women were not even

⁶ I consulted the following translations of the work; English: Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlan and Rusiyyah*; Norwegian: H. Birkeland, *Nordens historie i middelalderen etter arabiske kilder*. Oslo 1954, 17–24.

⁷ J. P. Schjødt, “Ibn Fadlan’s account of a Rus funeral: To what degree does it reflect Nordic myths?” In: *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, ed. P. Hermann, J. P. Schjødt, R. T. Kristensen, Turnhout 2007, 133–149; N. Price: “Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology.” *Medieval Archaeology* 54 (2010), 131–137; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 137–154; cf. J. E. Montgomery, “Vikings and Rus in Arabic sources,” In: *Living Islamic History. Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*. Ed. Y. Suleiman, Edinburgh 2010, 157–160.

⁸ P. G. Foote–D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: A Survey of the Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia*. New York 1970, 408; Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah*, 23; Montgomery, *Vikings and Rus*, 163. Cf. Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 138, who stated that “even if some features of the described rituals may be alien to Scandinavian culture, and were obtained in the East, the whole funeral has to be seen as Norse and nothing else.”

⁹ Hraundal, *New Perspectives*, 85.

¹⁰ P. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings. AD 700–1100*. London–New York 1982, 114.

permitted to enter.¹¹ However, we also hear about “Paradise” in Ibn Fadlan’s work, where he describes the Oghuz Turk views on the afterlife. This is the section where we also find the information that the Oghuz’ place their sick individuals into tents and leave them there, strikingly similar to the story of the dead Rus chieftain who is left in his tent for ten days.¹² According to Hraundal, even the tattoos on the Rus’ would probably be better explained as a borrowed tradition from the East rather than from Scandinavia, as Inner-Asia is the place where the archaeological traces of this body embellishment can be found.¹³ The group depicted by Ibn Fadlan, therefore, likely represented an ethnicity in formulation, which evolved through the interaction between warrior-merchant groups of Scandinavian origin and local Turkic tribes living along the Volga.

These Turkic influences, however, were by no means confined to the Volga area. The Dnieper region was also the home of nomadic tribes, such as the Magyars¹⁴ and the Pechenegs, both of which had considerable contact with the Rus’ in the ninth–tenth centuries.¹⁵

Prince Sviatoslav (945–972), for instance, fought in alliance with Magyars and Pechenegs during his Bulgarian campaign. In 971, he and his remaining army retreated to Dorostolon, where they were besieged for weeks. According to the Byzantine chronicler Leo the Deacon, the Rus, whom he calls “Tauroscythians”, according Byzantine historical tradition, performed sacrifices during the siege:

“When night fell, since the moon was nearly full, they [the Tauroscythians] came out on the plain and searched for their dead; and they collected them in front of the city and kindled numerous fires and burned them, after slaughtering on top of them many captives, both men and women, in accordance with their ancestral custom. And they made sacrificial offerings by drowning suck-

¹¹ Hraundal, *New Perspectives*, 85.

¹² Hraundal, *New Perspectives*, 86–88.

¹³ Hraundal, *New Perspectives*, 87.

¹⁴ Although the Magyars originally spoke a Finno-Ugric language, their culture was evidently Turkic in character. In addition, it is also reported that they were fluent in one of the Turkic languages taught to them by the adjoining tribes of the Khabaroi. *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De administrando imperio*. Vol. 1., ed. Gy. Moravcsik, trans. R. J. H. Jenkins, Washington 1967, 174–175.

¹⁵ A. N. Szaharov, “Orosz-magyar szövetségi kapcsolatok a 9–10. században.” [Russian-Hungarian alliances in the ninth–tenth centuries] *Századok* 120 (1986), 111–122; Á. Bollók, “Inter barbaras et nimiae feritatis gentes’. Az Annales Bertiniani 839. évi rhus követsége és a magyarok.” [‘Inter barbaras et nimiae feritatis gentes’. The rhus legation of the Annales Bertiniani in the age of 839 and the Hungarians] *Századok* 138:2 (2004), 349–380.; M. Tösér, “A 971. évi dorostoloni hadjárat.” [The Dorostolon campaign of the year 971] *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 115/2 (2002), 335–352; *De administrando imperio*, 48–53.; *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian text*. ed. and trans., S. H. Cross, O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, Cambridge 1953, 71–73, 85–90, 122.

ling infants and chickens in the Istros, plunging them into rushing waters of the river.”¹⁶

The account is brief and taciturn compared to Ibn Fadlan’s report and it is resultantly problematic to detect clear Scandinavian or Slavic characteristics in it. The vague description of cremation as well as human and cock sacrifices could well have been “the ancestral custom” of not only the Scandinavians but also the Slavs. For instance, on the subject of 10th-century Slavs, Ibn Rusta notes that they hang one of the wives of the dead by the neck and, after she has suffocated, cremate her.¹⁷ Concerning the sacrificing of cocks, Thietmar of Merseburg writes that this is a custom of the Scandinavians, but many scholars suspect it to be a Slavic custom as well.¹⁸ However, there are few details that can help to locate another cultural heritage in this ritual.¹⁹ The victims of Viking human sacrifices are in most cases volunteers, and perhaps occasionally criminals or unfit leaders; however, the sacrifice of hostages is extremely rare.²⁰ This also goes against the usual Rus mentality where the victims are not forced into the procedure. Besides the slave girl participating in the ritual voluntarily, Ibn Fadlan also subsequently described how the retinue members of the Rus king willingly submit themselves to suicide upon their master’s death.²¹ Ibn

¹⁶ *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century.* ed. and trans., A. Talbot, D. F. Sullivan in cooperation with G. T. Dennis and S. McGrath, Washington D.C. 2005, 193.

¹⁷ *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North.* trans., P. Lunde, C. Stone, London 2012, 124.

¹⁸ *Thietmari Merseburgensis Episcopi Chronicon*, (Monumenta Germaniae Historica) ed. I. M. Lappenbech. Hannover 1889, 23–24. (Lib. I/13.); I. Wenska, “Sacrifices among the Slavs: Between Archaeological Evidence and 19th Century Folklore.” *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* 10 (2015), 271–313.

¹⁹ V. Tarras, “Leo Diaconus and the Ethnology of Kievan Rus’.” *Slavic Review* 24:3 (1965), 395–406.

²⁰ About Viking human sacrifices, see: H. R. Ellis, *The Road to Hel. A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature.* New York 1968, 50–59; D. Bray, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Ideology in Old Norse Religion,” In: *The dark side. Proceedings of the Seventh Australian and International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference*, ed. C. Hartney, A. McGarrity, Sydney 2002, 123–135; Simpson, *Everyday life*, 185–186; A. Hultgård, “Menschenopfer,” In: *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*. Vol. 9., ed. H. Beck et al., Berlin 2001, 533–546; K. Edholm, “Människoooffer i fornordisk religion. En diskussion utifrån arkeologiskt material och källtexter.” *Chaos* 65 (2016); the only example of Vikings sacrificing hostages (as far as I know) was made on the shores of the Seine, where the Northmen said to hang up 111 Frankish prisoners of war. *Analecta Bollandiana*. Vol. 2. ed. C. D. Smedt, G. van Hooft, J. Becker, Brussels–Paris 1883, 78. This act, however, might be related more to the frightening of the enemy rather than being offerings to the gods and the spiritual background of the act is also dissimilar to the ones performed in Dorostolon (see the discussion below).

²¹ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah*, 21.

Hawqal also notes that Rus servants go into death voluntarily, just like servants in India, Gana and the Kura region.²² The sacrifice of prisoners therefore suggests a spiritually different purpose.²³ Regarding the Khazars, the Byzantine Theophanes recorded that after the death of one of their eminent magistrates, the *tudun*, they sacrificed 300 hostile prisoners in 710/711 in order to serve the *tudun* as retainers in the afterlife.²⁴ The sacrifices during the siege of Dorostolon are likely to be interpreted this way, namely that the Rus sacrificed hostages to avenge their fallen warriors and force the enemies to serve them in the afterlife (in this way, making the fallen Rus warriors the real victors). This is later supported by Leo's words; he notes that the Rus preferred to lean onto their own swords rather than fall into captivity, as the one who is killed by the enemy goes on to serve him in the afterlife.²⁵ This practice is incompatible with the Scandinavian notion of Valhalla, a warrior heaven where the fallen warriors receive credit for dying in battle. In contrast, besides the Khazars, the practice has been recorded in relation to other nomadic tribes too, such as the Magyars, Mongols and the Oghuz'.²⁶

The sacrifices performed by Sviatoslav's men could well have been influenced by Turkic nomadic habits, as he had been fighting together with (and sometimes against) them for a long time. The idea that Turkic habits may have been influential is testified to by Sviatoslav's character itself. The Rus prince was always on the warpath and lived his life in the saddle as a typical nomad, according to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*:

"Stepping light as a leopard, he undertook many campaigns. Upon his expeditions, he carried with him neither wagons nor kettles, and boiled no meat, but cut off small strips of horseflesh, game, or beef, and ate it after roasting it on the coals. Nor did he have a tent, but he spread out a horse-blanket under him, and set his saddle under his head."²⁷

Furthermore, he wore his hair in a ponytail and shaved the remaining parts of his skin.²⁸ A coiffure of this kind was characteristic of the Magyars at this

²² Birkeland, *Nordens historie*, 51.

²³ R. A. E. Mason, "The Religious Beliefs of the Khazars." *The Ukrainian Quarterly* 51:4 (1995), 407.

²⁴ *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History. AD 284-813*, ed., trans. C. Mango, R. Scott in cooperation with G. Geatrex, Oxford 1997, 527-528.

²⁵ *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 195.

²⁶ Gy. Moravcsik, "Zum Bericht des Leon Diakonos über den Glauben an die Dienstleistung im Jenseits." *Studia Antiqua. Antonio Salač septuagenario oblate*. Prague 1955, 74-76.; Tarras, *Leo the Deacon*, 401.; Ibn Fadlan and the Land of the Darkness: *Arabic Travellers in the far North*. trans. P. Lunde, C. Stone, London 2012, 18.

²⁷ *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 84.

²⁸ *The History of Leo the Deacon*, 199.

time.²⁹ Sviatoslav also wore earrings, a fashion historically associated with the East rather than with the Scandinavians or Slavs, who usually had long hair-styles and thus would not have been able to put jewellery like this on public display.³⁰ Sviatoslav is one of the best examples of the complexity of early medieval identities. As a Rurikid, he was of Scandinavian descent, just like many of his commanders and warriors. However, he was also the first Rus prince to have a Slavic name and, moreover, to lead a nomadic life.

Although the patterns are less clear cut, we can also suspect different cultural traits in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Administrando Imperio* (DAI), when the work describes the sacrifices of Rus merchants on their way through the Dnieper to Constantinople:

"...they reach the island called St. Gregory, on which island they perform their sacrifices because a gigantic oak-tree stands there; and they sacrifice live cocks. Arrows, too, they peg in round about, and others bread and meat, or something whatever each may have, as is their custom. They also throw lots regarding the cocks, whether to slaughter them or to eat them as well, or to leave them alive."³¹

It is suspected that we are dealing with a Scandinavian ritual here. However, in the words of Obolensky, the ritual also "[tallies] with our admittedly meagre knowledge of Slavonic pagan ritual".³² A comparison of the three rituals can perhaps shed more light on the matter.

In terms of the location, all three rituals are performed near the water's edge, which has always held a sacred place in Scandinavian cosmology as a gateway between different worlds.³³ Viking objects found in wetlands are well-known examples of ritual sacrifices from the Scandinavian and the West-European archaeological records,³⁴ and some archaeologists interpret Viking

²⁹ *A honfoglalás korának írott forrásai*. [Written sources of the Age of the (Hungarian) conquest (of the Carpathian Basin)] Szegedi Középkortörténeti Könyvtár, Ed. Gy. Kristó, Szeged 1995, 186, 199; *Liutprandus Cremonensis: Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana Monumenta Germaniae Historica* 19, ed. J. Becker, Hannover-Leipzig 1915, 185.

³⁰ Tarras, *Leo the Deacon*, 404–405.

³¹ *De administrando imperio*, 61.

³² Obolensky, *The Byzantine Sources on the Scandinavians*, 158.

³³ J. Lund, *Åsted og vadested. Deponeringer, genstandsbiographier, og runling strukturering som kilde til vikingetidens kognitive landskaber*. [Brooks and fords. Depositions, objects biographies and spatial structuring as sources for Viking Age cognitive landscapes] PhD dissertation, Oslo 2008; J. Lund, "Banks, Borders and Bodies of Water in a Viking Age Mentality." *Journal of Wetland Archaeology* 8 (2008), 51–70.

³⁴ J. Lund, "At the water's edge." In: *Signals of Belief in Early England. Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited*. ed. M. Carver–A. Sanmark–S. Semple, Oxford–Oakville 2010, 49–66.

swords found near the Dnieper cataracts in the same manner.³⁵ Adam of Bremen already noted that the Swedes undertook sacrifices at springs.³⁶ It is likely that this habit was brought by the Vikings to the “East” as well, as the *Life of St. George of Amastris* also mentions the veneration of springs by the Rus.³⁷ Therefore, at first glance, the location of the ceremonies still seems to suggest Scandinavian origins.

The ritual on Saint Gregory Island, however, is unique in that it is performed at a tree. In Scandinavian mythology, the world tree Yggdrasil, as an *axis mundi*, held together the different layers of the world. Besides its central place in the cosmology, Yggdrasil had a protective function too; this is evident from the data of the Old Norse sources as well as those of the archaeological records.³⁸ The tree on the island of Saint Gregory could perhaps symbolise Yggdrasil as the “protector”, because the ritual was conducted after the Rus were relieved by the cessation of threatening Pecheneg attacks near the Dnieper cataracts.³⁹ The sacrifices may signal gratitude for the safe passage. Early pagan Slavs, however, also venerated springs,⁴⁰ and the oak tree was a centre of worship in Slavic mythology, the oak tree being the sacred place of the god, Perun.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the fact that the *DAI* refers to the Dnieper rapids not only in Slavic but in the Old Norse language suggests that a considerable number of the Rus passengers were still related to Scandinavia. This is supported by a stone carved with Old Norse runes found on the island of Berezan, which is also on the Dnieper route to Constantinople,⁴² and the close Gotlandic analogies of the five presumably “sacrificial” Viking swords that were found near the island of Saint Gregory.⁴³ Of course, Slavs may have

³⁵ F. Androshchuk, “Har götlandska vikingar offrat vapen i Dnepr-forsarna?” [Have Gotlandic Vikings sacrificed weapons in the Dnieper rapids?] *Fornvännen* 97:1 (2002), 9–14.

³⁶ *Magistri Adam Bremensis Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*. Monumenta Germaniae Historica 3, ed. B. Schmeidler, Hannover 1917, 257–258.

³⁷ *Life of St. George of Amastris*. trans., D. Jenkins et. al., https://library.nd.edu/byzantine_studies/documents/Amastris.pdf [accessed: 17.02.2017.] For the authenticity of this source see: G. Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*. Oxford 1959, 188–189.

³⁸ A. Gilmore, “Trees as a Central Theme in Norse Mythology and Culture. An Archaeological Perspective.” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 23 (2016), 16–26.

³⁹ “From this island onwards, the Russians do not fear the Pechenegs until they reach the river Salinas.” *De administrando imperio*, 61.

⁴⁰ *Procopius History of the Wars*, Procopius in Seven Volumes Vol. 4., trans. H. B. Dewing, London–New York 1924, 269–273.

⁴¹ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York 2009, 109–120, 159–161; it must be noted that oak was associated with sacrifices made to the Scandinavian god Thor as well, see: Simpson, *Everyday life*, 176.

⁴² F. Braun, T. J. Arne, “Den svenska runstenen från ön Berezanj utanför Dneprmynningen.” [The Swedish runestone from the island of Berezan following the mouth of the Dnieper] *Fornvännen* 9 (1914), 44–48.

⁴³ Androshchuk, *Har götlandska vikingar*, 9–14.

joined the expedition, and the close similarities between early Slavic and Old Norse religions could only have strengthened their bonds with the assimilated Northmen. Trees played a spiritual role not only in Baltic and Slavic beliefs,⁴⁴ but also in the religions of Turkic tribes, where, as in Old Norse cosmology, they held together the different layers of the world.⁴⁵ Thus, among the 10th century pagan religions, striking similarities can be found (e.g. the similar pantheons of the gods),⁴⁶ which made it easier to adapt to the different practices and beliefs.

In all three accounts, we find poultry (hens, chickens, cocks) as sacrificial animals.⁴⁷ Cocks and roosters were important actors in Norse mythology.⁴⁸ Cocks were evidently fulfilling a beacon-like role, as foreboders of great calamities; consequently, their role in Scandinavian rituals as instruments of soothsaying and prophecy is not surprising. Archaeological evidence of cocks being sacrificed can be found in Scandinavian burials, too.⁴⁹

The sacrificial animals, however, are executed in different ways in the three accounts, which can be explained by the different intents of the rituals, but the method of execution is also helpful in locating parallels. As noted above, the hen is decapitated in Ibn Fadlan's work, whilst in Leo the Deacon's *Historia* the chickens are drowned in water. Ritual drowning in water is also mentioned by Adam of Bremen in his description of the pagan habits of the Swedes, the origin of most of the Northmen who came to the East.⁵⁰ However, one meagre parallel might be insufficient to confirm the Scandinavian roots of this execution method.

⁴⁴ P. Jones, N. Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*. London–New York 1995, 174; Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, 123.

⁴⁵ M. Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. W. R. Trask, Princeton 1972, 269–274; Mason, *The Religious Beliefs*, 400–403.; Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, 32–34; Sz. G. Kljastornij, "Török nyelvű népek mitológiája," [Mythology of Turkic-speaking people] In: *Mitológiai enciklopédia*, [Encyclopedia of Mythology] ed. Sz. A. Tokarev, Budapest 1988, 490, 492; I. Fodor, "Az ősi magyar vallásról." [About the ancient Hungarian religion] *Csodaszarvas* 1 (2005), 12–13.

⁴⁶ O. Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus'. Old Scandinavian Sources other than the Sagas*. Vol. 1., Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute Monograph Series, Cambridge–Massachusetts 1981, 73–86.; S. H. Cross, "Primitive Civilization of the Eastern Slavs." *The American Slavic and East European Review* 5:1 (1946), 79; Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, 40–41.

⁴⁷ In the case of the Dorostolon sacrifices, we cannot be sure that chickens were sacrificed, as the observer likely viewed the events from a considerable distance (as he was presumably in the Byzantine camp) and at midnight which both make it hard to distinguish between poultry of different kind. The "chickens" could thus well have been roosters or hens also.

⁴⁸ Schjødt, *Ibn Fadlan's account*, 143–144.; *Eddukvæði* Vol. 1. ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Vésteinn Ólason, Reykjavík 2014, 302, 313

⁴⁹ Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 149; K. Jennbert, *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion*. Lund 2011, 103.

⁵⁰ *Magistri Adam Bremensis*, 257–258.

What is especially interesting is the third example in the *De Administrando Imperio*, where it is decided whether the cocks are to be killed (in an unspecified way), eaten or left alive by casting lots. We are already familiar with the practice of casting lots from the Scandinavian tradition (*hlutkesti*);⁵¹ however, the work *Chronica Slavorum*—written around 1172 and describing some of the sacrificial habits of the Slavs—reports that the pagan “priest” also casts lots to designate the festivities dedicated to the gods.⁵² The time span between the *DAI* and the *Chronica* is long, though Thietmar of Merseburg also mentions the Slavic habit of lot casting from 1005.⁵³ It is therefore hard to decide whether this practice stems from Scandinavian culture or from local Slavic habits, especially given that the Slavic god Perun also used to receive cockerels as offerings.⁵⁴

It is also not unique that the Rus’ on the island of Saint Gregory allowed the possibility to eat the sacrificial animals. It is not only mentioned in connection with Scandinavians in *Hákonar saga Góða*,⁵⁵ but often in relation to Turkic cultures as well. Ibn Fadlan recorded that the Oghuz’ used to eat the sacrificial horse.⁵⁶ Certain rites thus seem to be more or less identically performed in early medieval pagan religious rituals, which would easily give way to the development of mixed customs. Such an instance is mentioned in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* when the Rus’, upon contracting, took oaths upon their weapons, which is a well-known Scandinavian tradition,⁵⁷ and at the same time they also pledged allegiance to Slavic gods—Perun and Volos.⁵⁸

There might be a similar cultural mix on Saint Gregory Island. Here, the Rus pegged arrows around an idol (in this case a holy tree). Arrows were not exclusive cultural markers of Scandinavians or Turkic speaking peoples. Identifying these as the Scandinavian “war arrows” often heard of in the *Kings’*

⁵¹ Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, 54; Bray, *Sacrifice and Sacrificial Ideology*, 126.

⁵² *Helmoldi presbyterii chronica Slavorum a. 800–1172*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, ed. J. Martin, Lappenberg 1868, 52. (Lib. I/52.)

⁵³ *Thietmari Merseburgensis Episcopi Chronicon*, 302–303. (Lib. IV/24.)

⁵⁴ M. Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Russian & Slavic Myth and Legend*, Denver–Oxford 1998, 217; M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs*. London 1971, 166. As far as I am concerned, cocks are mentioned in early medieval sources on Slavic beliefs only in connection with the sacrifices during the Dorostolon siege and the ones at the island of Saint Gregory. However, the pure Slavic nature of these rituals was contested here and thus it is also possible that cock sacrifices came into the Rus’ tradition through Scandinavian influence.

⁵⁵ *Snorri Sturluson: Heimskringla*. Vol. 1. Íslenzk Fornrit 26, ed. Bjarni Aðalbarnarson, Reykjavík 2002, 167–168.

⁵⁶ *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 18.

⁵⁷ M. Stein-Wilckshuis, “Scandinavians swearing oaths in tenth-century Russia: Pagans and Christians.” *Journal of Medieval History* 28 (2002), 155–168.

⁵⁸ *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 65, 90; Cf., Cross, *Primitive civilization*, 81, who claims that the Scandinavians retainers swore on Perun whilst the Slavs on Volos.

Sagas as being carried through the land in times of war,⁵⁹ or as distinctive features of steppe nomadic warfare, would both be very dubious associations. In Slavic mythology, on the other hand, arrows were one of Perun's distinctive weapons (representing his lightning bolts).⁶⁰ This, together with the sacred oak tree, would suggest a Slavic ritual.

However, it is worth drawing attention to the similarities between the rituals of Saint Gregory Island and those of Ibn Fadlan's passages, where the Rus' also erected poles around unnamed idols.⁶¹ In addition to this specific correspondence, it is notable that both rituals were performed by merchants regarding a successful business trip, and that, besides arranging poles (and arrows), food was offered in both cases as well. The purpose and the performance of the rituals seem to be identical, the use of arrows being the sole difference. This is intriguing since the practice of pegging poles is also known in the Scandinavian cultural-religious milieu.⁶² An Arab emissary of the 10th century, al-Tartushi, whose lost work survives in 13th century excerpts, writes that the inhabitants of the Scandinavian commercial town Hedeby celebrate a feast by sacrificing an ox, a ram, a goat or a pig, which they then hang outside in front of their houses on a pole to make it visible to everyone.⁶³ This strongly resembles Ibn Fadlan's description, in which the Rus' tie "the heads of the cows or the sheep to that piece of wood set up in the ground."⁶⁴

Thus, at least two interpretations are possible. Firstly, supplemented by other Scandinavian characteristics in the ritual discussed at the beginning of this article, the construction of sacrificial poles in Ibn Fadlan's work may represent a Scandinavian tradition. The ritual performed on Saint Gregory Island must then be a variant of the "original" Scandinavian custom, where the material culture was substituted in order to fit Slavic beliefs better, specifically the veneration of the thunder god Perun. Secondly, it is also possible that the Rus' on the Volga erected idols according to indigenous Slavic habits, substituting the arrows with poles. Whatever the case, both Rus communities would inevitably have been affected by both Slavic and Scandinavian cultures, as implied by the details of the rituals and the contextual evidence.

⁵⁹ About its exemplary occurrences in different *Kings' sagas*, see, Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*. trans. L. M. Hollander, Austin 2009, 115, 156, 177, 190, 199.

⁶⁰ Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Russian & Slavic Myth*, 217.

⁶¹ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsīyyah*, 9–10.

⁶² The Icelandic poet Egill Skallagrímsson erected a horse's head on a pole to frighten away the land spirits of his rivals in Norway. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit Vol. 2., ed. Sigurður Nordal, Reykjavík 1933, 171. The purpose and context of Egill's act, however, does not seem to correspond with the rituals discussed here.

⁶³ J. Georg, *Arabische Berichte von Gesandten an germanische Fürstenhöfe aus dem 9. und 10. Jahrhundert*. Berlin–Leipzig 1927, 29; Birkeland, *Nordens historie*, 103–104.

⁶⁴ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsīyyah*, 11.

In addition, while stabbing spears into a tomb (presumably with a flag on them) was common among the Volga Bulgars (whom, as discussed above, had considerable cultural influence on the Rus'), judging by the archaeological evidence and ethnographical parallels, the Magyars also performed such funerals.⁶⁵ These are not analogous to the habit recorded by Ibn Fadlan and al-Tartushi, but it suggests that the custom of erecting ritual poles, albeit in a different form, was at least known in the Turkic world as well. A closer analogue is mentioned by Ibn Fadlan himself when describing the habits of the Oghuz who, during a funeral, sacrifice one or two hundred horses, and suspend the horses' heads, legs, skins and tails on wooden poles.⁶⁶

The Slavs also employed spears in their sacrifices, although they never stuck them in the ground. In Thietmar's chronicle, two spears are placed crosswise on the ground,⁶⁷ in Herbold's biography of Otto of Bamberg, nine spears are laid down in a cubit distance from each other,⁶⁸ and in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, the spears are used as compasses pointing towards lands of interest, which the Slavs planned to conquer.⁶⁹ This is not to suggest that the Rus' modified their habits, rather than they lay down poles due to the influence of the Bulgars, Oghuz or Khazars on the Volga, or the Magyars and the Pechenegs in the Dnieper region. However, it should be emphasised that certain elements in a ritual were subject to change, and, because of the dearth of sources, we cannot really measure the extent to which this change was caused by foreign influence, the circumstances of the time or the available resources.

In fact, the exact reason why the Rus used arrows for this particular performance could be sought in the circumstances of the ritual itself, rather than in a conscious cultural heritage. While the Rus merchants on the Volga had a presumably safe passage, the Rus' on the Dnieper voyage were constantly under attacks from the Pechenegs. This may explain why the Rus' of the *DAI* utilised arrows for the ritual: as arrows were the most optimal weapon for warfare on the river, they probably carried them with themselves in abundant numbers. While not excluding the possibility that the use of arrows could have been

⁶⁵ L. Kovács, "A honfoglaló magyarok lándzsái és lándzsástemetkezésük." [Spears and spear burials of the Conquering Hungarians] *Alba Regia* 11 (1970), 81–108.

⁶⁶ *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 18; Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsīyyah*, 11. n. 34. In a somewhat different form, this ritual was documented about Mongols as well. *The Texts and Versions of John De Plano Carpini and William De Rubruquis*, ed. C. R. Beazley, London 1903, 49.

⁶⁷ *Thietmari Merseburgensis Episcopi Chronicon*, 303. (Lib IV/24.)

⁶⁸ *Herbordi Dialogus de Vita Ottonis Episcopi Babenbergensis*, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, ed. G. H. Pertz, Hannover 1868, 91. (Lib II/33.)

⁶⁹ S. Sielicki, *Saxo Grammaticus on pre-Christian religion of the Slavs. The relevant fragments from book XIV of Gesta Danorum*, 9. [accessed online: https://www.academia.edu/11345671/Saxo_Grammaticus_on_pre-Christian_religion_of_the_Slavs_the_relevant_fragments_from_book_XIV_of_Gesta_Danorum_final_draft_23.02.2017.]

related to the violent connotations of the trip and the ritual, it is also likely that the Rus merchants simply used the objects at hand to undertake the performance. Practical decisions could have easily outweighed regulations. Prince Sviatoslav, for instance, did not sacrifice weapons and food to his cremated comrades, even though the Rus' on the Volga did so. Of course, the lack of weapons and food in the Dorostolon sacrifices can be attributed to the inattentiveness of the Byzantine spectator, but the possibility that Sviatoslav, as a practical military commander, deliberately chose not to waste valuable tools and supplies under siege cannot be ruled out. By using local materials and adapting to the situation at the time, Sviatoslav would have displayed a high level of flexibility, especially towards religious practices. The motif of erecting poles is an example where material culture could be easily substituted or even omitted if necessary.

Based on the aforementioned information, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1) Scandinavian analogues of certain features of pagan Rus ritual practices were still discernible in the middle of the 10th century. The prevalence of waterfront locations, (presumably) holy trees, human and animal sacrifices (especially cocks), and the use of weapons and other grave goods suggests that Scandinavians had not yet been fully assimilated in the 10th century. Although these elements were also similar to the habits of the Slavs, contextual evidence hints that a decisive number of the participants in these rituals came from Scandinavian ethno-religious backgrounds.

2) The universal features and striking similarities among contemporary pagan religions helped the Rus' mentally adapt to specific rites and beliefs. In the case of the Slavs, the long cohabitation assured the merge of these cultures on a religious level (e.g. the identification of Nordic gods with their Slavic counterparts).⁷⁰ However, the ongoing interaction between the Rus' and Turkic nomadic peoples also seems to have influenced Rus rituals. In addition to the aforementioned examples, Ibn Rusta noted that the Rus' had their own special healing men called *atibba*, who served a function comparable to that of the shamans of the steppe.⁷¹ Likewise, Ibn Fadlan described the spiritual role of the Rus king as being akin to that of the Khazar khagans.⁷²

The relatively quick adaptation can be explained by another supposition as well. Scandinavians coming to Eastern Europe had already encountered nomadic people in their homelands, the Sámi, who performed rituals similar to

⁷⁰ According to some, Vladimir established the idols of pagan Varangian-Rus gods in Kiev to create a common mental origin for his ethnically mixed retinue. M. Font, "A magyar kalandozások és a kelet-európai viking terjeszkedés." [The Hungarian incursions and the East European Viking expansion] In: *Állam, hatalom, ideológia. Tanulmányok az orosz történelem sajátosságairól*, [State, Power, Ideology. Studies on the peculiarities of Russian history] ed. M. Font, E. Sashalmi, Pécs 2007, 44; Vernadsky, *The Origins of Russia*, 123.

⁷¹ Birkeland, *Nordens historie*, 17.

⁷² Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsīyyah*, 21–22.

those of the nomadic tribes in the East.⁷³ Sámi shamanistic rituals and magic seem to have had a considerable impact on Old Norse religion,⁷⁴ and the knowledge of Sámi culture among the Scandinavians must have been widespread. The Sámi originally dwelled in the Northern parts of present-day Finland, Sweden, and the Northern and Southern parts of Norway. Vikings operating in the East mostly came from these areas, which made it possible for them to meet Sámi people before moving to the East. Moreover, the Sámi were frequent characters in 13th-14th century Icelandic sagas,⁷⁵ suggesting that their culture was well-known even in the more distant parts of the North centuries later. This means that not only "Swedes" and "Norwegians" could have been familiar with the variants of shamanistic customs, but others as well. Therefore, meeting folks with similar practices was certainly no shock to them.⁷⁶

3) The Rus' were highly pragmatic people who not only embraced new perspectives, but also adopted local fashions and replaced their genuine objects with local material culture when necessary. Such flexibility in handling objects in a ritual context definitely supported the development of miscellaneous rites.

Looking at pagan Rus rituals as melting pots of cultural influences can bring us closer to understanding contemporary Rus identity. Depending on with whom they entered into contact with (and for how long) during their activities in the East, Scandinavian groups could become diverse culturally not only from the other inhabitants of the region, but also from each other.

⁷³ Å. Hultkrantz, "Aspects of Saami (Lapp) Shamanism." In: *Northern Religions and Shamanism*. ed. M. Hoppál, J. Pentikäinen, Helsinki 1992, 138–146; Eliade, *Shamanism*, 379–387; see for instance a recorded Sámi ritual probably by an eyewitness: *Historia Norvegie*. ed. I. Ekrem, L. B. Mortensen, trans. P. Fisher, Copenhagen 2006, 92–93.; in the sagas, see: Hermann Pálsson, "The Sami people in Old Norse Literature." *Nordlit Arbeidstidsskrift i Litteratur* 5 (1999), 29–53.

⁷⁴ E. Mundal, "Coexistence of Saami and Norse Culture – Reflected in and Interpreted by Old Norse Myths." In: *Literature and Society. Papers of the 11th International Saga Conference*, ed. M. C. Ross, Sydney 2000, 346–355.; N. S. Price, *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, PhD dissertation, Uppsala 2002.

⁷⁵ Hermann Pálsson, *The Sami people in Old Norse Literature*, 29–53.

⁷⁶ H. R. E. Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium*. London 1976, 283–300.