

Imitations and Alterations: Numismatic Evidence of the Relationship between the Varangian-Rus and the Khazars

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Several avenues of investigation must be applied to better understand the relationship between the multicultural merchants and mercenaries identified as the Rus, or Varangians, and the Khazar Khaganate during the ninth century CE. Silver dirham coins, minted by the Abbasid Caliphate and imitated by others, were the lifeblood of trade between the Baltic and Black Sea regions. This exchange of silver coins for chiefly slaves and furs was facilitated by both far traveling Jewish merchants and the earliest Rus, who had Scandinavia, Slavic, Baltic, and Finno-Ugric ethnic and linguistic origins. Numismatic and archaeological evidence points to increasing influences between the Baltic Sea region and the East, especially in trade emporia, during the ninth and tenth centuries. With this trade, by the end of the ninth century the earliest Rus' dynasty, now known as the Rurikids, was able to expand its power to the trading center of Bulgar, modern Kazan in Russia at the edge of the Khazar Khaganate. By adapting the iconic imagery of the Khazar ruling dynasty, the tamga, into Rus' symbolism, the bident and trident "sign of Rurik," the early Rus' solidified their ruler over formerly vassalized groups by the Khazar Khaganate in the tenth century when the steppe khaganate began to wane in power. By following the story told by imitated and altered coins, the influences on the earliest Varangian-Rus culture become more evident.

Introduction:

In the early ninth century CE, a host of merchant cadres, made up of Svear, Gotlander, Baltic, Slavic, and Finno-Ugric peoples, traveled down the rivers of modern Russia and Ukraine, including the Dnieper, Don, Volga, and Kama Rivers.¹ During their voyages, these Varangian-Rus traders encountered a plethora of peoples, ideas, and lucrative trade goods. Most significant among the latter to the Varangian-Rus were the silver *dirham* coins, minted in the Abbasid Caliphate, or imitated by the rulers of Volga Bulgaria, Transoxiana, and Khazaria.² Only by examining the numismatic evidence from this era of history, in conjunction with the textual evidence, can we formulate a clearer picture of the relationship between the early Varangian-Rus and the Khazar Khaganate during the ninth century.

Calling of the Varangians

With the “Calling of the Varangians” episode (860 CE) in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, scholars have proposed a *terminus post quem* for dating the instalment of the Rus’ Rurikid Dynasty. The text alone does not prove this point, though, as it was written hundreds of years after (twelfth to fourteenth century) and clearly shows itself to be dynastic propaganda. However, the archaeological evidence corroborates this event. The proliferation of the “sign of Rurik,” a bird-like bident or trident graffitied on coins and stamped into seals, shows a symbolic shift within the communities from across Eastern Europe and modern Russia after 860 CE.

Though scholars have some issues with the veracity of the dynastic tales told within the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, it is still the only near-contemporary written source which speaks in detail about the activities of Rurik and his successors, the Rurikids. After establishing that the Varangians had imposed tribute on “the Chuds, the Slavs, the Merians, the Ves’, and the Krivichians” (859) but were driven “back beyond the sea”, the *Russian Primary Chronicle*’s entry for the years 860-862 states:

There was no law among them, but tribe rose against tribe...they began to war one against another. They said to themselves, “Let us seek a prince who may rule us and judge us according to the Law.” They accordingly went overseas to the Varangian Russes: these particular Varangians were known as Russes, just as some are called Swedes, and others Normans, English, and Gotlanders... they said to the people of Rus’, “Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us.”³

The account goes on to explain that Rurik and his two younger brothers established themselves as rulers and brought order to the lands. This account is highly aggrandized in order to ascertain the Rurikid Dynasty as coming from Scandinavia to rule over the tumultuous Slavic lands.⁴ It clearly indicates that the ruling house came from Scandinavia, that they were distinct from other eastern Scandinavians, and that they established a dynasty in Northern Russia with Rurik taking his residence in Novgorod. To establish the validity of this change in dynastic rule, scholars must turn to archaeology.

The Khazar Khaganate

As trade in silver and furs greatly increased in the ninth century, so did the sphere of influence of the Khazar Khaganate, who in the eighth century took advantage of the power struggle between the Umayyads and Abbasids in the Islamic Caliphate to expand their hegemony over other peoples, both north into the forest zones of modern Russia and Ukraine, and south into the Caucasus Mountains and Crimea. Khazar influence reached its peak in the mid-ninth century creating a *pax nomadica* which allowed this trade to flourish. Around 831 CE, the Khazar Khagan, or the *Beq*, the secondary military ruler, asked the Byzantine Emperor Theophilos to send him Greek stone masons to construct a new fortress to be named Sarkel, located on the Don River, which

connects the Volga River system to the Black Sea.⁵ This kind of large stone fortress building is not the norm for Turkic nomad groups, who were certainly influenced by Iranian, Arabic, and Byzantine practices. Its construction shows the importance of the burgeoning trade networks flowing up and down the waterways.

To address the relationship between the Rus and Khazars in the ninth century, we must turn to the *Annales Bertiniani*, a Latin account of the East Frankish court of Louis the Pious. In 839, a group of travelers arrived at the court with the Byzantine envoy, who claimed (*id est gentem suam*) their “whole people” were called the *Rhos*. These accompanying *Rhos* also “claimed” to be on an official mission of friendship from their ruler, who is titled *chacanus*, Latinized khagan. The *Rhos* had travelled with the Byzantine embassy from Constantinople to avoid a perilous journey back to their homeland, likely an encroaching Pecheneg horde. The Byzantine Emperor Theophilus was invested in these *Rhos*’ continued journey, as he made the request for their passage in his letter to Louis. However, Louis did not believe them to be truthful, as they “belonged to the people of the Swedes” (*comperit eos gentis esse Sueonum*), so they were detained until word could come back from Constantinople.⁶ From this entry, it is clear that the *Rhos* mentioned had ties to both Scandinavia and steppe nomad cultures, though what those connections were remains in question.

Some scholars have used this passage of the *Annales* to try to prove that there was a Rus’ Khaganate centered around the Lake Ladoga region of Northern Russia. However, the archaeological evidence does not support this claim, as the Norse presence in the settlement at Staraya Ladoga was still small at this point, with a larger Slavic and Finno-Ugric population in the hinterlands. This, and evidence of other Slavic groups along the river systems where the early Rus are said to have inhabited, led many Russian and Soviet scholars to believe that the Rus were unadulterated Slavic people.

The debate between these two sides of Rus ethnogenesis is called the “Normanist Controversy.” I, along with other scholars such as Marika Mägi, argue that the origins of the Rus lie within a plethora of peoples, though.⁷ The *Rhos* at Ingelheim’s khagan was not likely of the Rus people, but a steppe nomad overlord to the groups of Slavic, Scandinavian, and Finno-Ugric merchants and settlers who moved into their sphere of influence, some of whom made up the group we identify as the Rus.⁸ This brings me to believe that Khagan of the Khazars is the most likely candidate for the *chacanus* mentioned in the *Annales Bertiniani*.⁹

Imitations and Alterations

The ninth and tenth century trade routes running through Eastern Europe were not a novel development as the same trade routes which brought Baltic amber to the Mycenaean Greeks in the Bronze Age facilitated the movements of goods throughout antiquity. However, the ninth and tenth centuries CE are a time of increased activity in this region as the northernmost end of the Silk Roads ended on the shores of the Black Sea in the Khazar Khaganate. After the collapse of the Hunnic steppe confederation in the sixth century, Gothic and other Germanic warriors returned or resettled in the Baltic Sea region. Not only do their epic histories, such as the works of Saxo Grammaticus, confirm this, but so do their artistic styles, such as the crossbow type fibulae of the Gothic armies of the fifth century, which continued to influence styles all over the Baltic and Scandinavia during the Vendel Period (550-790).¹⁰ These Gothic connections to Sweden do not end here though, as scholars such as Tore Gannholm, Line Bjerg, John H. Lind, and Soren M. Sindbaek have all written extensively on the continued trade relations between the Danube Basin and the Crimean Goths with Gotlanders. These were a distinct group of Baltic Scandinavians, separate from the Danes, Normans, or Svear who lived on the island of Gotland and the southern tip of modern Sweden, Scania.¹¹ It is in the late

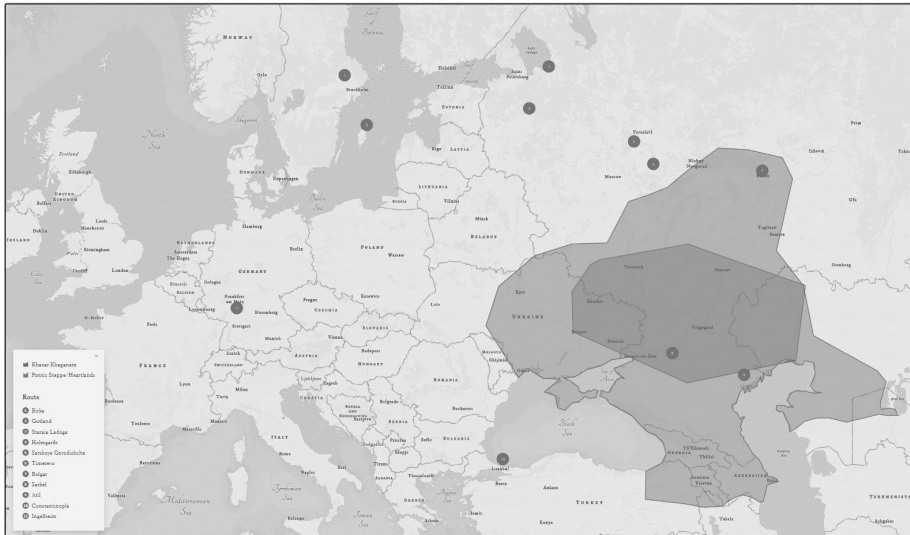


Figure 1: Map of Khazar Khaganate and the significant sites mentioned in this article. Made by Author with Arc GIS Storymaps.

eighth and early ninth century that the trade network between the Abbasid Caliphate and the Khazars began to increase greatly. As the Islamic *dirhams* found their way further north in greater quantities, the Varangian-Rus merchants' interest in these silver coins increased. The Khazars used this established form of coinage to create their own imitation *dirhams*.

The imitation *dirhams* certainly did not go unnoticed either, as the tenth century Muslim geographer and diplomat Ibn Fadlan notes, "In Khwarazm [a city in the southern part of Transoxiana], the *dirhams* are adulterated and should not be accepted, because they are made of lead and brass."¹² Finds from the island of Gotland and Uppåkra in Scania, show imitations made by the Khazar Khaganate as nearly identical to their Abbasid-made contemporaries, except for a few very specific changes. Most of the Khazarian imitations from the late eighth and early ninth centuries have unaltered Arabic inscriptions, with some of them adding a *tamga* beneath the script. The use of this twig-like clan or family mark is usually associated in the eighth through tenth centuries with the Saltovo-Majaki

culture of the Khazar Khaganate, though it had significance with earlier Iranian groups, as well as with later Turkic and Mongolic speaking peoples.¹³ The *tamga's* shape is also important as it resembles the early Rus' rulers', the Rurikids, dynastic symbols, the bident and trident, linking the iconography of the Khazar Khaganate to the earliest Rus' state.¹⁴ Along with the early Rus' use of the title khagan for their rulers in both Arabic and Frankish sources, the connections between the ninth century Rus and the Khazars is undeniable though uncertain in nature.

By 837/8 CE, Khazar *dirhams* had altered a great deal more. Their imitations took on a political and religious context of their own as the Khazars replaced the Caliphate's writing with their own text, "*Ard al-Khazar*" [Land of the Khazars] and the Islamic creed with "*Musa rasul Allah*" [Moses is the Messenger of God].¹⁵ Moses being the foremost figure of the Jewish faith, these coins help archaeologists and historians to better identify when the conversion of a portion of the Khazar court took place, sometime in the late eighth or early ninth century, before 837/8 when these

coins were minted. This was not a wholesale conversion of the Khazar population and their tributary states though. Many kept their shamanistic Tengrism beliefs, and it is more likely that only a section of the nobility led by *Beq* Obidiah converted to Judaism due to heightened contacts with Jewish Radhanite merchants as well as migrants from the Byzantine Empire in the eighth century.¹⁶ It is possible that this conversion was not a bloodless affair as Magyar and Iranian Qabar elements of the Khazar Khaganate migrated to the west during this period, possibly in a political revolt or caused by pressure from the encroaching Pecheneg horde from the east.¹⁷ All of these factors created uncertainty in the Ponto-Caspian Steppe that the ninth century Rus took advantage of.

There are three intriguing *dirham* finds of unknown origin held in the Chernihiv Regional Art Museum in Ukraine. Two of these *dirhams* have bidents graffitied on them while the third has a trident. In his work *The Viking Rus*, Wladyslaw Duczko attempts to connect the “sign of Rurik” with different prevalent symbols of the region, but does not come to a conclusion as to these assessments.¹⁸ However, he does include an evaluation of possible interpretations, stating “by being included among the other objects executed as graffiti on the coins—swords, standards, hammers of Thor, spears, battle knives, and sign of Rurik—we have to assume that even the forked arrowhead had, like the previously mentioned items, symbolic content.”¹⁹ The similarity between the *tamga* and the bident and trident symbols of the Rurikid Dynasty might be a coincidence; however, since both symbols were in use in the same regions of Eastern Europe it is possible that the iconography in use by the Khazars was coopted by the early Rus to better establish their control over the groups who were once part of the Khazarian Khaganate or aware of their dynastic symbol.

The earliest dated evidence of the “sign of Rurik” comes from graffitied coins. An Islamic *dirham* minted in Basra, Iraq, in

877/78, which was deposited in Gotland, Sweden, between 880–885, is the earliest example of the use of the bident version of this dynastic sign.²⁰ The coin is of a typical type from the Islamic Caliphate but has a crude bident scratched into its surface. Three sides of a square with a small triangle on the connecting piece are etched into the metal. This bird-like bident resembles a number of other finds from Estonia and Sweden, which have a much more bird-like appearance to them. A *dirham* fragment deposited after 903/902 in Pogorelshchina, Belarus displays images scratched upon both sides of the coin. On one side is the bident, looking very bird-like, while the other side shows a standard.²¹ This combined imagery harkens to references made to the standard of Odin which is depicted as having a raven on it in the 878 CE entry for the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, possibly pointing to the “sign of Rurik” being used on battle standards before the beginning of the tenth century when this coin was deposited. This numismatic evidence points towards a political shift within the region which coincides with the textual evidence of the arrival of the Rus’ Rurikid Dynasty.

From the time of *knyaz* Svyatoslav (d. 972) more official signs of the Rurikids appear in the material evidence, showing the continued use and standardization of this symbol.²² A seal found at Kiev²³ depicts a very bird-like bident surrounded by quasi-Greek letters and even incorporating a cross at the top of one side. The bident clearly shows Svyatoslav’s connections to the Rurikid Dynasty with its shared symbolism to the earlier coin finds, while the quasi-Greek letters point towards his military inclination to conquer southwards from Kiev. The final interesting element on the seal, the cross, possibly identifies Svyatoslav’s mother Olga’s influence on courtly dynastic decisions.²⁴ Svyatoslav ruled more as a khagan, traveling from region to region to suppress his tributaries and conquer new lands, while his mother took care of the day-to-day politics. Perhaps, this seal was her, not his, official way to stamp documents

which she approved of with her sign of faith, while also displaying the steppe nomad influence in the bident.

The proliferation of the bident symbol in archaeology allows us to determine that the events described in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* have at least some validity. A group of conquerors, using the bident symbol, with ties to Scandinavia, moved down the rivers of Russia, mingling with local groups, before establishing themselves at Kiev. They traded with Slavs and Scandinavians extensively, as the evidence of graffitied coins shows. Then, when they were well established, they began to construct a dynastic image based off the graffiti they scratched onto the *dirhams* they traded with. This imagery was incorporated into their official seals and symbology. Though there is not the time to discuss further incorporations of the bident signs in early Rus' symbolism here, the evidence is clear that the bird-like bident was the progenitor of the bird symbolism within Russian art and iconography used in later centuries.

Another element to some of the Islamic and Khazar *dirhams* are holes drilled to attach a bail to make a pendant. The Swedish site of Birka grave 632 of the Svear culture, likely dating from the late ninth or early tenth century, has revealed a number of coins together as "a series of pendants, most of which had been imported from abroad. These pendants originated in England, Khazaria, Byzantium, the Islamic world and the Carolingian empire, thus representing a microcosm of the Viking sphere of contacts."²⁵ This and other archaeological evidence indicate that these *dirhams* became a symbol of elite power for the early Rus, wearing not only their wealth but the very items which made them wealthy altered into jewelry. This connection between *dirhams* and elite power placed alongside the evidence of the *tamga* and "sign of Rurik" upon these same coins, is not a coincidence. The power that these high-quality silver coins brought to Scandinavia spread from the east, up the rivers of Russia in the hands

of traders first, cultivating an elite group which then invaded and migrated into those same lands where the *dirhams* were once traded.

So, the question becomes, what were the Rus traders offering in return for the *dirhams* to the Bulgars and Khazars who served as intermediaries between them and the Caliphate? Slaves were certainly a part of this trade, but it is impossible to know how large of a part they played as archaeological evidence of ancient and medieval slavery can be difficult to identify. However, Arabic sources do confirm that *Saqāliba* slaves of pale complexion were highly valued.²⁶ What scholars have confidently identified is the presence of trading for pelts between the groups. Like the Canadian fur-trappers and voyageurs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Finno-Ugric tribes and Rus merchants brought an astonishing amount of fox, beaver, martin, and sable pelts south to feed the fur frenzy which took place in Baghdad during the ninth and tenth centuries.²⁷ Ibn Fadlan notes the value of pelts several times, while another Arabic writer, Al-Masudi, says in his work *Muruġ adh-Dhahab*,

Arab and Persian kings take pride in their black furs, which they value more highly than those of sable-martens, and other similar beasts. The kings have hats, kaftans and fur coats made of them, and it is impossible for a king not to possess a caftan or a fur coat lined with these black *burtasi* (*foxes*).²⁸

Arab writers are not alone in noting the popularity of this commodity, as the eleventh century Frankish ecclesiast Adam of Bremen in describing a Baltic tribe from *Semland* says,

They have an abundance of strange furs, the odour of which has inoculated our world with the deadly poison of pride. But these furs they regard, indeed, as dung, to our shame, I believe, for rightly or wrongly we

hanker after a marten skin robe as much as for supreme happiness. Therefore, they offer their very precious marten furs for the woollen garments called *faldones*.²⁹

From these sources, we can clearly see that fur pelts were a shared currency, along with the silver *dirhams*, for many peoples, as the late ninth-century Old English account of Ohthere's travels in the North Sea also shows that marten pelts were used as common tribute from the Finnas people.³⁰ Distribution of the *dirhams* and these same fur trade routes directly coincide across Eastern and Northern Europe.

The east coast of Sweden, particularly the island of Gotland, shows the greatest concentration of *dirhams*. According to Tore Gannholm of the University of Uppsala, the proliferation of *dirhams* found on Gotland is not the only close connection between Gotland and the East, as he and many other scholars believe that there was a trade agreement signed between Gotlanders and Byzantine Emperor Leo VI in the early tenth century, as well as the Byzantine royal house having both Gotlander and Khazar ancestors.³¹ At least thirty-nine Runestones spread across Scandinavia attest to Norsemen travelling to Byzantium,³² while both Rus' Chronicles and Scandinavian Sagas place enormous significance upon the "Great City," *Miklagard*, which was the Old Norse term for Constantinople.³³ Mercenary service to rich foreign rulers helped to propel the far-flung adventures of the Scandinavians in a unique way, inspiring generations of skalds in the ninth and tenth centuries.³⁴ Though the mid-twentieth century scholar J. Brutzkus' theory that the Rus were mercenaries for the Khazar Khaganate in the ninth century has found little evidence to support it directly, it certainly fits the form for these silver seeking Norsemen who traveled armed to trade in far-off lands.³⁵

While many Russian scholars, relying on the *Russian Primary Chronicle*,³⁶ have made the Rus out to be bodyguards and strong

arms, a "retainer culture" for their Slavic counterparts, many Scandinavian scholars have attempted to use the Islamic source material to refute this claim.³⁷ Typically, these Islamic sources can be relied upon to be far more reliable. One of the earliest of these accounts is that of the Arab geographer Ibn Rusta, who wrote from 903–913, but heavily relied upon an earlier unavailable source from the mid-ninth century. Within a longer description of their marshy island homeland and customs of trading and raiding, he states that the Rus have a king they call "Khagan Rus."³⁸ Ibn Khurdadbeh in his *Book of Roads and Kingdoms* from the late 840s mentions a group called the "ar-Rus" who are part of the "as-Saqaliba" which is generally considered the Slavs in later accounts, but here simply means pale skinned. These "ar-Rus" levee tithes from other pale skinned tribes and trade furs with the Khazar Khaganate in their city of Itil, and "on occasion they bring their merchandise on camels from Gujan to Baghdad" where they claim to be Christians to avoid heavier taxation.³⁹ These two accounts, and other later sources, greatly help to illustrate the culture which was behind the *Rhos* at Ingelheim as well as the Varangians who are "called" to bring order to the land in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*.

Conclusion

From the textual, numismatic, and archaeological evidence available about the relationship between the Varangian-Rus and the Khazars, we can conclude that the Rurikid dynasty used the *dirhams* brought by long distance trade, not only to make themselves wealthy but also possibly helping establish their dynastic iconography by coopting the *tamga* symbol either directly or indirectly to establish their power in the region north of the Khazar Khaganate in the late-ninth century. However, the emergence of this cross-cultural connection between these Norse-Slavic and Turkic speaking peoples had already begun in the preceding half century, as both Frankish and Arabic sources corroborate the Rus' use of the title

khagan from the early-ninth century. Though there is not enough evidence to prove that the Rurikids intentionally and directly took their iconography from the Khazars, the coincidences are too great to ignore. By incorporating more interdisciplinary methods of study scholars can begin to lift the grey fog which hangs over the early middle ages and determine the extent of the influences between cultures through trade.

Endnotes:

- 1 Gannholm 2013, 179; Mägi 2018, 212.
- 2 Noonan 1998, 209.
- 3 Nestor 1953, 59.
- 4 Duczko 2004, 78–79.
- 5 Golden 2007, 155, 159.
- 6 Duczko 2004, 17–19.
- 7 Magi 2018, 198–199.
- 8 Androšuk 2013, 59.
- 9 Duczko 2004, 24–28.
- 10 Bliujiene 2011, 29–31.
- 11 Bjerg 2013, 7, 241.
- 12 Faqlān 2017, 54.
- 13 Duczko 2004, 236.
- 14 Hedenstierna-Jonson 2009, 172.
- 15 Golden 2007, 156.
- 16 Gannholm 2015, 28; Preiser-Kapeller 2016, 3.
- 17 Golden 2007, 155; Ивик 2013.
- 18 Duczko 2004, 235.
- 19 Duczko 2004, 237.
- 20 Hedenstierna-Jonson 2009, 171.
- 21 Duczko 2004, 230.
- 22 Hedenstierna-Jonson 2009, 171.
- 23 Found at the site of the Tithes Church in the oldest layer below the church's foundations. See Duczko 2004, 230-231.
- 24 Duczko 2004, 231.
- 25 Audy 2018, 174.
- 26 Magi 2018, 200.
- 27 Kovalev 2001, 26–28.
- 28 Kovalev 2001, 26; Noonan 1998, 154.
- 29 Magi 2018, 150.
- 30 Orosius 1984, 20.
- 31 Gannholm 2013, 200.
- 32 Olausson 2009, 145.
- 33 Androšuk 2016, 5.
- 34 Androšuk 2016, 345.
- 35 Brutzkus 1944, 120.
- 36 Nestor 1953.
- 37 Hansson 1997, 11, 53.
- 38 Duczko 2004, 32; Macartney 1930, Appendix A.
- 39 Duczko 2004, 22.

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