



## *The Culture and Customs of Saqaliba in Ibn Faḍlān's Siāhat-Nāme (Travel Narrative) 921*

### **Budaya dan Adat Istiadat Saqaliba dalam Siāhat-Nāme Ibn Faḍlān (Naratif Perjalanan) 921**

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#### **Abstract**

*This research aims to investigate one of the travelogues written during the Abbasid era (656-1258), namely Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue. This account is the result of Ibn Faḍlān's journey to the regions of Persia, Turkey, Saqaliba, and Khazar. To achieve the objectives of this study, the first section will discuss Ibn Faḍlān's journey, the reasons behind it, and its historical impact. The second section will delve into the Saqaliba and their role in the region using historical and comparative methods, as well as exploring relevant texts that focus on the culture, traditions, and classification of the Saqaliba.*

*The research findings indicate that Ibn Faḍlān was the first to provide information about the Saqaliba and their relations with Bulgaria and the Slavic people. Importantly, in his role as a political envoy, in addition to his specific mission of promoting Islam and declaring the Caliph's support for the Saqaliba against the Khazar, Ibn Faḍlān provides an overview of the culture and customs in Europe and non-Muslim countries to the Muslim community and the Caliph. Thus, this travel account stands as the first record of non-Muslim European customs presented within the caliphate system.*

**Keywords:** Civilization and Culture, Customs, Saqaliba, Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue, Middle centuries, the Abbasid Caliphate

#### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki salah satu catatan perjalanan yang ditulis selama era Abbasiyah (656-1258), yaitu catatan perjalanan Ibn Faḍlān. Catatan ini merupakan hasil dari perjalanan Ibn Faḍlān ke wilayah-wilayah Persia, Turki, Saqaliba, dan Khazar. Untuk mencapai tujuan penelitian ini, bagian pertama akan membahas perjalanan Ibn Faḍlān, alasan di baliknya, dan dampak yang dihasilkan menggunakan metode sejarah. Bagian kedua akan membahas Saqaliba dan peran mereka di wilayah tersebut dengan menggunakan metode sejarah dan perbandingan, serta mengeksplorasi teks-teks relevan yang fokus pada budaya, tradisi, dan klasifikasi Saqaliba.

Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Ibn Faḍlān adalah orang pertama yang memberikan informasi tentang Saqaliba dan hubungan mereka dengan Bulgaria dan suku Slavia. Yang lebih penting, sebagai utusan politik, selain misi khususnya untuk mempromosikan Islam dan menyatakan dukungan Khalifah bagi Saqaliba melawan Khazar, Ibn Faḍlān memberikan gambaran tentang budaya dan adat istiadat di Eropa dan negara-negara non-Muslim kepada umat Muslim dan Khalifah. Dengan demikian, catatan perjalanan ini menjadi catatan pertama tentang adat istiadat non-Muslim Eropa yang disajikan kepada sistem kekhalifahan.

**Kata kunci:** Peradaban dan Budaya, Adat Istiadat, Saqaliba, Catatan Perjalanan Ibn Faḍlān, Abad Pertengahan, Kekhalifahan Abbasiyah.

## INTRODUCTION

After the slowdown in the course of conquests and the expansion of the Islamic territory, the issue of introducing diverse nations and religions inside and outside the Islamic world was put on the agenda. Moreover, in order to study their thoughts, experts were sent on excursions among them to translate the culture, customs, and traditions of those tribes by recording observations. Of course, the trips were usually personal and, now and then, individuals were sent by the rulers as ambassadors.

Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue, an account of his journey in the middle centuries, is considered the first travelogue in Bulgaria and Russia in the territory of the Islamic Caliphate and even in the world. The data reported by this tourist are still a source of reflection and have always been researched and examined by different scholars because these data are the product of an era when there was no discussion of ethnic and linguistic boundaries and distinctions as can be observed nowadays. This difference entailed doing varying studies for different regions, and one of these regions is the land of the Saqaliba. Ibn Faḍlān was sent to this region by Caliph al-Muqtadir bi-llāh and his account of traveling to these regions helps us to get a picture of the people of this region as well as their culture and traditions (Ahmad & Ali, 2022).

Besides introducing this travelogue, this research aims to introduce the people of Saqaliba. Then, the culture and customs of the Saqaliba will be examined based on the text of Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue; more specifically, the reference here is to Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue edited by Sam Hadi, which is reliable and widely accepted and it also contains various readings.

1- The story of Ibn Faḍlān and the reasons for his journey and its effects

2- The story of Ibn Faḍlān and his travelogue

Related resources are silent on Ibn Faḍlān's life and there is by no means any report on his life. Although his experiences remained unknown for centuries, he has been the canonical subject of diverse studies for years.

Therefore, the Russian Orientalist, Krachkovsky (1883-1951) writes, there is little and limited information about Ibn Faḍlān's life (1957, vol. 1/p. 187). No account of this travelogue and its author has been recorded in historical and geographical books and no scholar has ever mentioned him (Al-Dahhan, 1959: 37). Even "Tarajom" books (Biographies) have not mentioned Ibn Faḍlān. (Al-Hariri, 1991: 105), and more importantly, even historians have been unaware of this writer of the travelogue (Alshogran, 2015: 21). Furthermore, the only relevant information is what Yaqut al-Hamawi (1178-1228) mentioned in his book, writing, "The journey of Ahmed, the son of Faḍlān bin Abbas bin Rashid and the servant of Muhammad bin Suleiman, was to deliver the message of al-Muqtadir bi-llāh to the king of Saqaliba" (1995:1/486).

Accordingly, no information about his life, status, and mission is available, and all these issues remain unknown, and one can only argue that Ibn Faḍlān was from the Bani Hashem clan, seemingly one of the non-Arab servants, and that's why Mehrdad Izady claims him to be a Kurd, for which he does not provide any evidence (Izady, 1992: 41).

Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue is the only remaining work by him that brought him fame, and no works of his have ever been found apart from this work (Al-Antil, 1968: 8/118). Although it is not unlikely that another work of Ibn Faḍlān's will be found in the future; however, the only work left by him so far is this travelogue.

Here, the important point is that since this work does not make any references to geographical concepts, it cannot be characterized or categorized as a geographical work (Ziadeh, 1988: 9/109). Therefore, one can argue that this work is more anthropological than geographical.

## METHOD AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The research methodology used in this study includes historical and comparative methods. The historical method is employed to investigate Ibn Faḍlān's journey, the reasons behind it, and its resulting impact. This method involves analyzing relevant historical sources, including Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue itself, and conducting research on the historical and cultural context of the Abbasid era.

Additionally, the comparative method is utilized to study the role of the Saqaliba in the region. This method involves comparing the Saqaliba with other groups within the same geographical and cultural context. During this process, relevant texts discussing the Saqaliba, both from Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue and other sources, will be comparatively analyzed to understand the specific roles and characteristics of this group. By employing this research methodology, a comprehensive framework is established to explore information and gain insights into the historical and cultural context of Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue and the role of the Saqaliba in the region. The combination of historical and comparative methods aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The political characteristics of Ibn Faḍlān's era**

The political context during Ibn Faḍlān's era was a chaotic and fragile situation. In this period, Abi-Faḍl Al-Muqtadir bi-llāh Ja'far ibn Ahmad al-Mu'taḍid Abbasi (842-932), who is considered one of the youngest caliphs in the history of Islam, came to the throne in 925 at the age of 13. He was evidently very naïve and immature in politics, and timid, so his mother, Umm Qahramana, helped him handle governance affairs (Al-Sirjani, 2013, 1/299). However, his caliphate did not last long and after three years, he was dethroned and 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mu'tazz succeeded him (861-908). Shortly after this, Ibn Mu'tazz was killed and Al-Muqtadir returned to power, which itself stirred up mounting unrest. Meanwhile, the Qarmatian sect gained power and attacked the holy mosque, and the Romans invaded the borders of the Islamic territory and occupied some areas. As a result, the caliph's servants turned away from him and together with some other people headed for the caliph's house, and upon arriving there forced them to run away and later massacred them. Nevertheless, his caliphate lasted for twenty-five years. (Al-Zahabi, 2010, 28-30).

Al-Muqtadir was known for his extravagance. He inherited a treasury full of riches and his wife and children were involved in his decisions and all affairs were under their control. This situation led to very negative consequences for the political and social circumstances, and accordingly, crises intensified, inflation and famine spread, production stopped, and goods became scarce (Al-Dahhan, 1959: 18). Nevertheless, the authority of the government was unparalleled and the Caliph had a glorious position such that the ambassadors and envoys of the neighboring states headed for Baghdad in order to expand relations with the caliphate, and in the meantime, the king of Saqaliba's request for help from the caliph and his expressing obedience to him spring surprise and are thought-provoking (Al-Dahhan, 1959: 19- 21).

### **The time and duration of Ibn Faḍlān's journey**

Ibn Faḍlān's journey lasted eleven months. The Caliph's Embassy began their journey in Baghdad on Thursday, June 26, 921 (Ibn Faḍlān, 2003: 43), and arrived in the land of Saqaliba on May 23, 922 (Ibn Faḍlān, 2003: 75). In a letter rewritten by Sami al-Dahhan, Ibn Faḍlān has spoken of five nations (the Ajams, the Turks, the Slavs, the Russians, and the Khazars) and after providing limited data about the Khazars, he stops his discussion about the Khazars without even stating why he traveled to the Caspian region (Al-Antil, 1968: 8/135). Even the route of his return from the Caspian region has also remained unknown because not only is his discussion of the Caspian remains incomplete, but also the final part of his letter has been lost (Al-Zirikili, 2002: 1/196). In this case, it is also not clear whether he achieved his purpose on this trip or not. Yaqut Hamavi writes, "This is what I have reported in Ibn Faḍlān's letter about this trip when he was the supervisor and reporter" (1995: 3/83).

When Ibn Faḍlān returned to Baghdad and wrote his travelogue, he used the sentences in the past tense. Therefore, researchers such as Ahmad Abd al-Salam Al-Baqali and Nahla Alshogran have confirmed the authenticity of this claim that he wrote it in Baghdad (Al-Baqali, 1979: 120) and (Alshogran, 2015: 21).

Likewise, Ahmad Khalid pointed out that Ibn Faḍlān returned to Baghdad in the spring of 923 and thus his journey lasted two years (1970: 6/36) and "Allawi" also believes that he returned to Baghdad via the same route (2005: 166). But Muhammad Ghaiba believes that his

journey lasted for three years and he returned to Baghdad in 924 and speculated about his route as follows, "As the delegation, after traveling to Persia, Turkey, and Russia, later moved toward the north of Europe and the Scandinavian regions and on their return, they went to the land of Saqaliba and then to the land of the Khazars and then they returned to Baghdad (1994: 17). However, this account of the delegation's travel route, which has frequently been depicted as Ibn Faḍlān's travel route and has been analyzed by several people, does not match the reality because it is quite evident that he did not travel to Scandinavia and this speculation is the fruit of propositions that are based on imagination which can be observed in part of his text.

### **Reasons behind Ibn Faḍlān's trip**

Having received a letter from the king of Saqaliba, namely "Almish Yiltawār", the caliph found out that the king had requested the caliph to send someone to him to teach him the rituals and customs of Islamic affairs and also to build a mosque for him so that the propagation of Islam will be promoted and facilitated in the entire territory of the Saqaliba. He also asked the Caliph to build a fortress for him to protect him from the attacks of his neighbors, including the Khazars (Ibn Faḍlān, 2003: 38-39). By reflecting on this letter, the factors and reasons for Ibn Faḍlān's journey can be enumerated as follows:

#### **1-Religious factor**

After the era of Islamic conquests and especially the Abbasid era, traveling to the conquered areas began, and due to the vast territory of the Islamic Caliphate (Ali, 2021). Obviously, these trips led to the discovery of new and surprising things. While traveling, the travelers also recorded an account of the areas they were passing through (Al-Hassani, 2006:246) (Faraj & Arif, 2022)

Sometimes, in order to propagate Islam religion, several new Muslims from these conquered areas would visit the heart of Islam, namely Mecca and Medina, to learn Sharia sciences and become more familiar with this religion (Al-Sirjani, 2007: 129). There were other reasons behind Ibn Faḍlān's journey and presumably Islamic education and familiarizing the Saqaliba with Islam, building a mosque for them, and providing instruction in the teachings of Islam, to name but a few.

#### **2- Administrative and military factors**

The geographical borders of the Islamic caliphate in the east extended to the borders of China and in the west to Andalusia (Al-Sirjani, 2007: 130), and this expansion was the result of conquests during the three periods of the caliphs who were the successors to the Prophet Muhammad, the Umayyad caliphate (Ali, 2020), and the Abbasid caliphate (Al-Kilani: 344), (Ali & Ahmad, 2021).

The problem of administering the conquered regions and the extent of the caliphate made them utilize geography and collection of data related to the routes and weather conditions to control and monitor these regions (Al-Sirjani, 2007: 130). The collection of zakat, jizya, and taxes also varied based on the weather conditions of the regions (Al-Nisaburi, 1985: 11/46).

In this regard, the government needed to organize transportation affairs and establish stations (Shoqi Zaif, 1987: 12), and of course, apart from the transportation function, these stations were used for other purposes such as collecting information about the areas under the control of the caliphate, collecting taxes (Palizdar and Hasanpour, 2016: 115), informing the government of enemy attacks, gathering forces for Jihad (Al-Shami, 114:1999). Accordingly, some areas of the Caliphate were chosen and designated as defense centers (Al-Sirjani, 2007:131).

In fact, Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue was used as a guide to knowing about the borders of the Abbasid caliphate in the east, introducing the people under the rule of the caliphate and the caliph himself to nations outside the caliphate. Certainly, it was also a guide to the distance between cities and the climatic conditions of different regions of the Abbasid caliphate.

#### **Political factor**

Ibn Faḍlān's delegation journey was actually a political agreement between the Abbasid caliph and the king of Saqaliba and somehow the declaration of loyalty and obedience of the king of Saqaliba to the caliph. Therefore, one can argue that after Ibn al-Munajjim's trip during the

reign of Caliph Wathiq, Ibn Faḍlān's journey was the second political trip by a delegation of the Abbasid Caliphate (Shakhatreh, 2021:17). In this trip, a fortress was constructed for "Almish Yiltawār" to protect him from the attacks of the Khazarians, who were their tributary (Al-Hamawi, 1995:485).

### **The influence of Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue on literature and art**

The importance of Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue is evident to this day and it is considered an important source of information about the peoples of Eastern and Northern Europe, especially the Scandinavians and the governments on the Volga River coast, which had not yet accepted Christianity (Amin, 2002: 7). As a result, this travelogue was translated into Arabic, Latin, German, French, Danish, Swedish and English (Lou'aybi, 2021: 48/141). Moreover, it has been evaluated as a literary and artistic source. The following can be mentioned as the effects of this travelogue on literary and artistic works.

Eaters of the Dead, a novel written by Michael Crichton in 1976 based on Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue and his scattered data in the libraries of Europe and America. He was unaware of the original text of the travelogue in the archives of the Holy Mashhad's Museum (Crichton, 1996: 8).

The Tree of Delights: This novel is about the mysterious adventures of Ibn Faḍlān, written by Muhammad As'ad, a Palestinian novelist. This novel is a mystical and emotional account of the story of Ibn Faḍlān and is related to the spiritual shifts that he experienced in Baghdad. Sufis, poets, and experts in jurisprudence led him to undergo an inner transformation. When he went to Bulgaria and after getting acquainted with Sindh and Indian believers, through inner experiences, he reached a high spiritual level and gained a high position in Sufism. The author has mixed modern times with the pre-modern era in this novel (Al-As'ad, 2019).

### **Movies and series**

Throughout these years and after the publication of Crichton's novel "The Dead Eaters", several films and series have been produced and shown all over the world based on this novel and Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue. The most famous of these works is the movie "The 13th Warrior" which was released in 1999 and directed by John McTiernan and starring Antonio Banderas as Ibn Faḍlān. Although the story of this film is fictional, it is influenced by this travelogue, and this is a sign of the constant and global effects of Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue (Al-Ahmadi, 2019: 95)

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue is one of the most important travelogues from a historical, scientific, and anthropological point of view. Meanwhile, this travelogue has managed to magnificently depict the various perspectives of different regions. In addition, this work has been able to deal with the cultural dimensions, customs, religious beliefs, and taboos of different regions in the utmost maturity and beauty, besides portraying their way of life, health, clothing, and food.

### **The culture and customs of Saqaliba in Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue**

#### **The concept of culture and customs**

A. Culture from a lexical point of view: This concept is basically derived from the Latin word "Culture" and means planting crops on the ground (Wiene, 1974, 613). The meaning of this word didn't change until the middle centuries when in France ritual songs were called "cultes". However, during the French revolution, the meaning of "Culture" was limited to the literary and artistic sense and was gradually used in the senses related to education. Finally, the 17th century philosophers began to classify scientific schools in human research and defined an independent subject as "Culture" (Arif, 1994: 20).

B. Culture from a semantic point of view: In Webster's New dictionary, the concept of "culture" includes the following meanings:

- a. The art of planting
- b. The act of growth as the product of education, law, and social experiences
- c. Distinguishing and explaining taste, which is associated with the following intellectual activities

- Artistic and intellectual meanings of civility
- Refinement of ethics and thought
- Familiarity with fine arts and humanities
- The aesthetic framework of human ethics and its products, including thought and an action which relies on human educating abilities (Webster, 1959, p. 1254).

However, in the Kurdish language, this word is used to mean intellect, science, and knowledge (Mukriani, 1384: 524). The above explanations tell us that this concept has historical roots in European languages and has gone through a process, but it lacks this characteristic in Kurdish. The meaning of this word among philosophers, sociologists, and historians is evolving to this day. When it was translated into Arabic and “*thaqāfat*” (culture) was used next to the word “*tamaddun*” (civilization), it led to confusion and a kind of bewilderment (Arif, 1994). :27). It should be noted that despite the similarity in the meaning and definition, these two words are basically different. Culture has a set of common features, which can be listed as follows:

It is a human phenomenon; it is an acquired process; it is a means of befooling others; it is a social phenomenon; it is a symbol; it is a comprehensive process and has the ability to carry, diffuse, and continue; it is the product of the majority; it is alive and transformable; it is transferable and language also plays an essential role in this field (Zebari, 2013: 131) (Jaber, 1991: 209) (Mulhern, 2000, 205).

### **The meaning of customs and traditions in the Kurdish language:**

A) From the linguistic point of view: The expression is a combination of two words “*dāb*” and “*narit*” and in fact, it is a compound word, as in Arabic we have “*ādāt wa taqālid*” and in Persian “*ādāb wa rosum*” and in English, the two words “*customs and traditions*” are used.

B) From the semantic point of view:

“*dāb*” means habit and getting accustomed to a fixed behavior that people are constantly doing. The synonym of this word in Arabic is “*ādāt*” and in Persian, it is “*ādāb*” and in English “*customs*”. “*narit*” means obeying and following and imitating the deeds of the ancestors, and is the synonym of “*taqālid*” in Arabic and “*rosum*” in Persian and “*tradition*” in English (Mustafa et al, 2004: 754) (Mukriani, 2012: 459).

Accordingly, “*dāb u narit*” is a spiritual element that has assumed a semi-legal status in the social arena. “*dāb u narit*” is the second layer of a set of beliefs, social values, religious beliefs, magic, national literature, legends and superstitions and general information that anthropologists observe and record through the behavior and actions of individuals (Salim, 1981: 47).

The significance of customs in diverse societies lies in the reasons indicating the issue of following them as a value, and some of these customs are building memory, strengthening communication, building a bridge between nations, and a sense of identity. When a person follows customs, it is possible to know oneself without feeling lost (Zaher, 1993:45). Hence, we come to the important point that the term “*dāb*” and “*narit*”, though made of two words, are often used alone, “*dāb*” refers to that dimension of behavior that is repeated, but “*narit*” refers to the ideological and spiritual dimension of our ancestors.

The Saqaliba in Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue:

The Saqaliba were a great nation of the Slavic race and the history of naming this nation “*Saqaliba*” dates back to the first century. Of course, in the beginning, this title was very respectful and meant the people of this region, but later its meaning was changed denoting “*slaves*” (Arslan, 2011: 21).

The main reason behind Ibn Faḍlān's trip to the region of Saqaliba to meet the king and observe the situation there was that the king of Saqaliba had requested help from Caliph Al-Muqtadir bi-llāh. The embassy reached the land of Saqaliba on May 17, 922.

Currently, the land of the Slavs is divided into three regions: East, West, and South. In the east, the Slavs are in the countries of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus; in the west, they inhabit Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Lithuania; and in the south, they live in the countries of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria (Singleton, 1985, p .14).



Identical materials related to the Saqaliba can be found in three sources: (Ibn Rusta, 1891: 143-144), (Al-Gardizi, 2006: 393), and (Unknown author, 1999: 139). Apparently, the two last sources have used the information and some words and expressions in Ibn Rusta.

The Saqaliba nation, mentioned in this travelogue, includes Bulgaria and the Bulgarians that are actually included in the Slavic race (Al-Mas'oudi, 2005: 1/352).

"Bulgarian" is used to refer to the nation that lives in the north of Romania. Their main origin is not known and now they are the owners of two states in the Volga River and the Danube River. (Al-Gardizi, 2006: 390). Regarding the Bulgarian region, Shakir Lou'aybi believes that today the main region of Bulgaria is located on the bank of the Volga River and in the territory of Russia (Al-Rihla, Al-Mohaqqiq's introduction: 11). Of course, this country borders the Turks in the south, with the Khazars in the west, and with Russia in the north, and at the time of Ibn Faḍlān's journey, this territory had its own king (Obeid, 2012: 254), whose nickname was "Qabara" according to Ibn Khurdadbeh's report (1889:330), but he doesn't mention what the meaning was.

After the arrival of the Caliph's embassy, the first measure taken by them was to change the way the king's name was announced on the Minbar (pulpit), about which Ibn Faḍlān narrates, "Before I arrived there, the khutba was read for the king from his pulpit in these words:

"O God! Preserve King Yiltawār, king of the Bulghārs."

I reminded them, "The king is God and from the pulpit none but He, the All-high and the All-powerful, should be called king. Your master, the Commander of the Faithful, is satisfied that the following should be pronounced from the pulpits in both East and West: 'My God, preserve your slave and caliph, Ja'far, al-Imām al-Muqtadir-billāh, the Commander of the Faithful.'"

He asked, "In what form may the khutba be read for me, then?"

"Using your name and that of your father," I answered.

"But," he said, "my father was an unbeliever and I do not want his name mentioned from the pulpit". Then he asked, "But what is the name of my master, the Commander of the Faithful?"

"Jafar," I told him.

He asked, "Am I allowed to call myself by his name?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then I shall take the name of Jafar and my father that of 'Abd Allāh. Give the man who pronounces the khutba his orders."

And that is what I did. He pronounced the khutba for him, saying:

"O God, preserve in good health your slave Jafar, son of 'Abd Allāh, amīr of the Bulghārs, a client of the Commander of the Faithful." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 117-118).

These words reflect the faithful adherence of the king of the Bulgars to the orders of the caliph and also the desire to prove his obedience to the caliph after accepting the religion of Islam (Al-Katani, 2020: 596).

About this case, he also narrates, "By God, although I live in a remote place, as you see, I still fear my Master, the Commander of the Faithful. I fear that he will learn something about me that will displease him, that he will call down God's wrath upon me and destroy my country without even leaving his kingdom, despite the great distance between us." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:122). This statement indicates that the king of Saqaliba was relying on the caliph, and was concerned about his ruling and religious position, therefore, he made great efforts to convert his subjects to Islam, and in return, the caliph sent an embassy to him to convey the message of the caliphate. Ibn Faḍlān was also bearing the King of Saqaliba's letter to the caliph, in which he addressed his people and wrote, "Our God has honored us with the presence of the caliph, I am his servant, and the caliph has chosen me as his representative, and anyone who opposes the caliph, I will stand against him with my sword" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 141).

One of the dire threats facing Saqaliba was the likelihood of attacks by the Khazars, whose king was a Jew (Al-Hamawi, 1995: 7/422). In this case, Ibn Faḍlān discusses the important point that the king's son was a hostage to the Khazars and he forced his daughters to marry the king (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 146). These events and threats caused him to write a letter to the Caliph to

stand against the Khazars and guarantee their security. It is worth mentioning that in the 9th century, about 25 rulers and kings had accepted the authority of the king of Khazars (Al-Daquqi, 1999: 75). Furthermore, the Khazars would arrest people of Saqaliba to sell them as slaves (Ibn Rusta, 1891: 7/144). Nevertheless, some have mentioned that the Saqaliba were warriors and tried to have an army and give them military training (Al-Bakri, 2008: 253) and they have been compared with the Turks (Al-Gardizi, 2006:390). Although Ibn Faḍlān refers to the Turks and Russians as having a cruel appearance, and calls the Khazars invaders and looters, while introducing the Saqaliba, he remains silent about them. Presumably, this silence is either due to their calm and peaceful nature or their king's obedience to the caliph.

### **The culture and customs of Saqaliba in Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue:**

#### **A) Saqaliba culture in the travelogue**

##### **1. The way of defining the culture of Saqaliba: their language and writing**

Every nation has its own language and writing system; therefore, the connection between language and culture is strong and noteworthy that can be felt in everyday affairs. Language is a reflection of the feelings of the people who speak it, and at the same time, it is their identity and a means of interpreting the world (Kurdi, 2013: 115).

The first outstanding point in Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue is the letter of the king of Saqaliba of Bulgaria to the Caliph, which was mentioned earlier (Ibn Faḍlān, 2003: 38-39). During the relatively long stay of Ibn Faḍlān in the Saqaliba regions, he met with their king on several occasions and also mentioned the amount of money that was sent to the king by the caliph. Also, he refers to his own suggestion about the way to introduce the king of Saqaliba on the pulpit and prayer-related issues as well as traitorous people (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 119-122). These cases can indicate the importance of language and writing systems in preserving culture and knowing the culture of other societies.

##### **2- Art**

One can claim that art encompasses all aspects of culture. Whatever a person does, requires its own special art, and more importantly, art is a social act with its own reflection in society. Accordingly, Ali Izzet Begovic believes that art is outside the boundaries of history and time, and society may be underdeveloped in terms of civilization and progress, but at the same time, it might have the most beautiful artistic manifestations (Begovic, 2021: 225-226).

Ibn Faḍlān has not mentioned the field of decorative art among the Saqaliba. Perhaps, either the author himself did not pay attention to this art or it was not important for the people of this land. For example, he writes about their housing, "The people of Saqaliba live in tents" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 131); however, he does not make any reference to the way of setting up the tent and the things inside it, and he only writes this, "The tent is very large, large enough for 1,000 people or more, and it is spread with Armenian carpets. In the center is a throne covered with brocade from Byzantium." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:131)

The author also describes an animal, smaller than a camel and larger than a cow, and surprisingly, its tail is like a cow's tail, it looks like a donkey, and its hoof is like a cow's hoof, with a big and strong horn in the middle of its head, and this animal is called a rhinoceros (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 141-142). Here, Ibn Faḍlān points out that he saw that the king had three large bowls, which he felt were made of Yemeni precious stones, but the king told him the bowls were made of the horn of that animal (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 142). Based on this report, it can be claimed that they probably had more beautiful artworks that he has not mentioned in his report.

In the meantime, it should be mentioned that this nation disliked knowledge and this anti-science attitude was a part of their culture. Therefore, this might be the reason why this nation did not take arts seriously, as he writes about this, "If they see a man whose mind is lively and who knows many things, they say: 'This man deserves to serve our Lord.' And they take him and put a rope round his neck and hang him in a tree until he falls to pieces." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:132-133).

Ibn Faḍlān narrates a story: "The king's interpreter told me that a man from Sind had come to this country by chance and remained for a time in the service of the king. He was skillful and intelligent. He was killed because they saw that he was quick-witted and intelligent" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 133).



### 3) Material issues

#### A) Cooking and nutrition

Upon reaching the land of the Saqaliba and reading the letter of the caliph and other elders of the Abbasid caliphate to the king of the Saqaliba, Ibn Faḍlān refers to the king's invitation and says, "We went to the king, he was sitting on his throne, the commanders were standing on the right side, so they were ordered to sit on his left side. He alone sat on the throne while wearing a dress made of Romanian fine silk. He ordered food which was chicken and meat and it was served" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 115). Then, he describes the eating habits of the king and says, "He offered me a piece of meat and they brought me a plate (after he cut off the piece of meat and offered it to the king who was sitting on his left side, and then he offered it to the princes in order and we all started and they started eating and when the king finished the food, the others also stopped eating and those who had not finished the food took it with them to their home (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 116). Next referring to the procedure after the meal, he writes, "The king asked for honey wine. This mead, which he was drinking day and night, was called *suju*. He drank a cup of wine and stood up and said, "I am proud and happy, for the sake of my lord the caliph - May God prolong his life. The elders from all over the country and his children stood with him, we also stood up, he repeated this act of drinking wine three times, and then we left the palace (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 116-117).

The custom that Ibn Faḍlān points out here is mostly a description of a royal banquet, but considering the food served for slaves and maidservants, he writes, "Barley soup was the special food of maidservants and slaves", and when the cooked meat was served, the meat was eaten by the elders and the servants enjoyed the soup which was given to them. However, if sheep were slaughtered, they could also eat meat (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 130).

Ibn Faḍlān describes the fruits and some of the strange products of this region and writes"

"One day when we were with the king we made camp and I went in among the trees with my companions, Tikīn, Sawsān, and Bārs, and one of the king's followers, who showed us the stem of a plant. It was small and green, like a spindle in thickness, but longer and at the base, a large leaf spread out on the ground which was carpeted with new shoots which bore a berry. If you tasted them, you would think they were seedless pomegranates. We tasted them and found them incredibly delicious, and spent our time hunting for them and eating them." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 128).

Then he talks about a kind of apple and continues:

"I also saw that they have apples with a taste more acidic than wine vinegar. The slave girls eat them and get plump." This point is worthy of reflection because sour fruit and especially green apple usually make people thin.

He refers to the abundance of hazelnut trees:

"I never saw more hazelnut trees than in their country. I saw forests of them, 40 farsakhs in area." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:128).

He also describes some trees and writes:

"I also noticed that they had trees that I do not know. They are extremely tall and the trunk is leafless, while the crowns are like those of a palm tree. They have narrow leaves like palms, but grouped together. The people of the region go to a place they know where such trees are, make a cut, and with the help of a container collect the sap which is sweeter than honey. If someone drinks too much of this liquid, he becomes drunk as if with wine, or even more so. They eat millet and horse meat, although there is also an abundance of wheat and barley. Their land was not suitable for agriculture, therefore, their wheat was not of high quality" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:129). What was important in this case was that the king had no rights whatsoever over their crops, and the farmers planted whatever they wanted, but they paid the king's share, which was twenty percent (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:129).

Another thing that the king puts taxes on is organizing wedding ceremonies and parties: "All those who give a wedding feast, or give a banquet are required to reserve a share for the king, proportionate to the importance of the occasion. They must also provide a measure of mead and a quantity of spoiled wheat" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:130).

Regarding the way of storing their food, he writes: "For their earth is black and stinking and they have no place to store their food, so they dig pits in the ground and put the food in them, with the result that within a few days, it rots and becomes disgusting and is no longer of any use." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:130). He also writes about the oil they use for cooking, "They have neither olive oil nor sesame oil; in place of these, they use fish oil, so that everything they make with it smells bad." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:130)

#### B) Housing:

Considering their way of housing, he does not give any useful information, and only in the introduction, he mentions the long distance from their own land and writes: "It is nearly seventy days from Jurjan to the city" and he also refers to their way of housing and writes they live in a tent. When he arrives in the city, he mentions setting up a tent and writes: "They set up a tent for us and we stayed in it" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:113).

#### C) Clothing:

He did not write about the way of their dressing and only before reading the Caliph's letter, he points out that they gave him a robe and a turban: "He wore a black robe and a turban was also placed on his head". He also points out that the queen was veiled, which indicates that they wore clothes and dress similar to the Abbasids (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 114-115).

#### D) Professions and occupations:

Based on Ibn Faḍlān's account, the Saqaliba of the Bulgaria region had several professions and occupations, although he did not address them explicitly and distinctly. However, while reading the report, it is possible to infer the existence of some common professions and occupations in this region, for which the examples are given below.

##### Masonry:

Although he did not mention the construction of houses and owning houses in this area, he mentioned the construction of a mosque and wrote about this: "They pray in a mosque that is made of wood", and also talks about the king's financial request for constructing the fortress, which implies the existence of a building in this area, although he did not mention the construction method at all" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 119-135).

##### Agriculture and gardening:

According to Ibn Faḍlān's report, the soil of this area is specially used for gardening and most of the land is dedicated to planting the hazelnut tree, although millet planting was also common. Presumably, since the soil of this area was not good for wheat, they inevitably turned to planting millet (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:129-130).

##### Trade:

Here and there in his report, the author mentions a large number of merchants who imported sheep from the land of the Turks and black foxes from the city of Wīsū. He also refers to the exchange of goods between the Saqaliba and the Khazar merchants and the Russians on the banks of the Atil River (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 134-136).

Besides the mentioned occupations, beekeeping, oil extraction, making plates from rhinoceros horn, fortune-telling, tanning, and sea transportation were among the other common occupations among the Saqaliba, to which Ibn Faḍlān makes merely some references (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 130-145).

#### 4) Belief in legends:

During his stay in Bulgaria, the author reports some common tales told by them, which are more like legends and fantasy, and among these legends, the following examples can be mentioned:

Hearing loud voices from the sky and changing the color of the sky, reddening the sky due to a very loud sound, the appearance of red clouds which have swords in their hands like humans. As he narrates based on their stories: "I saw a group of clouds that seemed to attack and charge one another and for an hour, they mixed together and separated again, and this situation continued until the last hours of the night and finally, they disappeared" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 123).

Short nights and long days; short days and long nights:

Discussing short nights, he points out that he was waiting for the call to Isha prayer, but the morning call to prayer was called, and that is why he asked the muezzin, “what call to prayer did you call now? What will happen to Isha?” He answers that since the night is short, Isha is called along with the morning prayer. Then he continues to write, the muezzin said that he had not slept for exactly one month in order to pray the morning prayer and not miss it. Then he says: “All the time when I was there, I observed that in their lands the days were very long and remained so for a certain part of the year and the nights were short. Then the nights lengthened and the days shortened.” (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:124-125).

#### Gog and Magog

Here, the king and one of his men narrate to Ibn Faḍlān about a person who was found by a group of merchants, telling his story as follows: “He was twelve cubits tall. He had a head the size of the biggest cooking pot there ever was, a nose more than a span long, huge eyes, and fingers each more than a span in length. His appearance frightened me and I had the same feeling of terror as the others. I wrote to the people of Wīṣū, who live three months’ distance from us, to ask for information about him. They wrote to me, informing me that this man was one of the people of Gog and Magog. One of them comes with a knife and cuts off a piece sufficient for himself and his family. If he takes more than he needs, his belly aches and so do the bellies of his family and sometimes he even dies, with all his family. Since they are surrounded by water on all sides, they have no way to escape, unless the Almighty God builds a dam for them or divides the sea and there are no fish left for them, and they are forced to leave there (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:136-138).

This account of Gog and Magog is exactly the opposite of the Muslim travelers’ account of Gog and Magog, who have described them as short people. He continues and describes this person’s imaginary character and writes:

“I questioned the king further about this man and he told me:

‘He stayed with me for a time, but no child could look at him without dropping dead and no pregnant woman without miscarrying. If he took hold of a man, his hands squeezed him until he killed him. When I realized that, I had him hung from a high tree until he died. If you want to see his bones and his head, I will go along with you and show them to you.’

‘I would like very much to see them,’ I answered.

He rode with me into a great forest filled with immense trees and shoved me towards a tree under which had fallen his bones and head. I saw his head. It was like a great beehive. His ribs were like the stalk of a date cluster and the bones of his legs and arms were enormous too. I was astonished at the sight. Then I went away” (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 139-140).

#### (5) Religion:

Based on Ibn Faḍlān’s travel account, it can be observed that although the people of this land had accepted the religion of Islam and became Muslims, their culture and customs were very different from the culture of Muslims, as the king of Saqaliba was very worried about the curse of the caliph: “I still fear my Master, the Commander of the Faithful. I fear that he will learn something about me that will displease him, that he will call down God’s wrath upon me and destroy my country without even leaving his kingdom, despite the great distance between us.” (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:121). This was probably due to the fact that the people of that country believed in omens and superstitions, and Ibn Faḍlān talks about fortune-telling for the beginning of the year, that if the omen was good, they expressed happiness and believed that the new year would be a blessed and affluent year. (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 127).

Regarding their superstition, the author points to other examples such as lightning, “When it strikes a tent, they do not go near it again, but leave it as it is, together with anything that is inside it – men, goods or other things – until time has destroyed them. They say that it is a tent upon which the wrath of God has fallen.” (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:132)

Ibn Faḍlān further mentions examples of their unconventional customs and practices and writes about this: “Men and women go down to the river together to wash completely naked, no one concealing their body from anyone else. I tried ceaselessly to induce the women to veil before men but I did not succeed.” (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:134)

Ibn Faḍlān goes on to discuss the spread of Islam among the Saqaliba, for example, he reports on a kin group and writes about them: "There were 5,000 members, counting men and women, and they had all converted to Islam. They were known by the name of al-Baranjār. They had built themselves a wooden mosque to pray in it, but did not know how to say the prayers. So I taught the whole group how it should be done." Meanwhile, he talks about a person called Tālūt: "He converted to Islam through my agency and I called him 'Abd Allāh. He said to me: 'I would like you to call me by your name, Muhammad.' I did what he asked. I also converted his wife, mother, and children and they all took the name, Muhammad!" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 135-136). And then he refers to the letters he sent to some of the tribes of Saqaliba to invite them to Islam (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 140-141), which shows that despite the acceptance of Islam by the king of Saqaliba, the people of this region followed different religions.

#### (6) Government, law, and regulations

##### The punishment for murder

"If one man kills another deliberately, they execute him, but if he has killed by accident they make a box for the killer out of khadank wood, put him inside with three loaves of bread and a jug of water, and close it with nails. Then they set up three wooden poles. They say:

'We place him between the sky and the earth, exposed to the rain and the sun – perhaps God will have mercy upon him.'

And he remains there until time has caused him to rot and the winds have dispersed his bones." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 132)

##### The penalty for adultery

Adultery is forbidden. "If somebody, no matter who he is, commits adultery, they set out four iron stakes, attach the guilty person by their hands and feet, and cut them in two from the nape of the neck to the thighs with an axe. They do the same to the woman. Then they hang the pieces of both bodies from a tree." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 134)

##### Punishment for theft

"They put thieves to death in the same way as adulterers." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 134)

##### Social customs and manners in Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue:

##### Hospitality:

"When we were a day and a night's journey from the king of the Saqāliba, for it was to him that we were heading, he sent out to welcome us the four kings who were under his authority, accompanied by his brothers and his sons. They greeted us, bringing with them bread, meat, and millet, and they rode with us. When we were two farsakhs away from the king, he came out to meet us in person. When he saw us, he dismounted and fell down with his face to the ground to give thanks to God, the All-High, the Almighty." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:113)

After the ceremony of welcoming and presenting the letters, the king invited us for lunch and after lunch, the king invited us to visit his territory. (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959: 115-128).

The birth of a child: "When a man's son has a child, it is the grandfather and not the father who takes the child, saying: 'I have more right than his father to raise him until he becomes a man.'" (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:131). performs a ceremony and a song, the king will take honey wine and poor-quality wheat from him as

Ceremonies: Whoever organizes ceremonies and parties or gives a feast or a banquet is required to provide a measure of mead and a quantity of spoiled wheat as a tribute." (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:130).

#### (4) Mourning

"If a Muslim or a woman from Khwārazm dies, then they wash the body in the Muslim fashion, load it onto a wagon and walk before it with a banner until they come to the place where they bury him, where the funeral ceremony is performed in the Islamic way.

In the mourning ceremony, the women do not weep for the dead, but the men weep over him on the day of death. On the day of death, elders and people stand at the door of his tent and sob, making the most hideous and savage noise. And after their lamentations are over, the slaves come with plaited leather thongs and weep continually as they strike their sides and any uncovered parts of their bodies with the straps. They must set up a banner before the door of the tent. They bring the dead man's weapons and set them around his tomb. They continue

these lamentations for two years. When the two years are over, they lower the banner and cut their hair, and the close relatives of the dead man offer a feast to mark the end of mourning. If the dead man had a wife, she can then remarry. This is the custom among the great men of that land. The common people only perform a part of these ceremonies for their dead.” (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:143-144).

(5) Compliments and greetings:

They all wear tall pointed hats. When the king mounts his horse, he rides alone without a ghulām or anyone accompanying him. As he goes past in the market, there is no one who does not rise and doff his hat and put it under his arm. All people are allowed to go to the king, and when they go to him, all of them, even the king's children and brothers, are obliged to bow. When they reach the king, they sit and then stand up until the king designates a place for them, then they sit, and whoever sits in front of the king does not put on his hat until the end of the sitting, except when he leaves the king (Ibn Faḍlān, 1959:131).

## CONCLUSION

In his travel account, Ibn Faḍlān managed to portray many cultural aspects and customs of the Saqaliba in the region of Bulgaria, which had not been demonstrated in this way before and even after him. Therefore, it can be claimed that Ibn Faḍlān's work on Saqaliba is the first work of its kind that reports the culture and customs of the people of Saqaliba in the form of a story and with a dynamic language in a sublime literary style, whose literary value is undeniable; although, he has made some mistakes. Furthermore, this travelogue is considered an authentic political report because it provides a vivid picture of the political conditions of the Saqaliba region and its relationship with the Islamic world during that era.

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