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Equal Rites

Parsing Rus' Gender Values Through an Arabic Lens

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Abstract

Gender studies has flourished across a broad range of areas relating to the medieval period. In recent decades, work has been undertaken both on documenting the presence and visibility of women in medieval contexts, and in analysing constructions of gender, power, and sexuality. Studies on the Rus', however, have not embraced gender studies to the same extent as other fields. Although some work has been undertaken to assess the archaeological presence of Rus' women, the treatment of these women by Arabic written sources has been largely overlooked.

This thesis seeks to redress this balance by highlighting and analysing the various female archetypes presented in Arab accounts of the ninth- and tenth-century Rus'. Taking a different direction than many studies of gender, this thesis works through an additional frame; Arab imaginings of the Rus' consider them as a strange and distant Other. In foregrounding cultural boundaries and a sense of the foreign in this study of Rus' gender values, I focus not on the actuality of women's lives among the Rus' but rather on how these lives were understood or imagined by Arab writers. As such, I mediate Arabic perceptions of the self and the Other in order to establish a typological framework for considering the women of the Rus' via the Arabic sources. This hinges on a basic binary; we can, broadly, see Rus' women in the Arabic sources either as victims of sacrifice, or as living women. Working from this basis, I incorporate an overview of gender values and frameworks in the 'Abbasid Caliphate into a cross-disciplinary analysis of how Rus' women are presented by Arab authors.

Ágrip

Kynjafræði hafa rutt sér til rúms á mörgum sviðum miðaldafræða. Síðustu áratugi hefur margt verið unnið við að draga fram sýnileika kvenna í samhengi miðalda, og í greiningu á kyni, valdi og kynferði. Rannsóknir á Rus hafa hins vegar ekki enn innleitt kynjafræði á sama hátt og önnur svið. Þó að fornleifafræði hafi sinnt ummerkjum um konur að einhverju leyti, hefur mest megnis verið litið framhjá framsetningu þeirra í arabískum heimildum.

Þessi ritgerð er eitt skref í átt að því að bæta úr þessu ójafnvægi, með því að draga fram og greina ýmsar kvenkyns erkitýpur sem finna má í arabískum heimildum um Rus á níundu og tíundu öld. Ólíkt mörgum öðrum kynjafræðinálgunum tekur þessi rannsókn einnig tillit til annars samhengis, sem er framsetning Rus sem undarlegra og fjarlæggra ‘hinna’ (Other). Í forgrunni eru mörk eða landamæri menningarheima. Megináhersla er hins vegar ekki lögð á veruleika kvenna í samfélagi Rus, heldur hvernig líf þeirra var skilið eða skynjað í verkum araba. Þannig er ætlunin að setja fram hugmyndir sem birtast í þessum verkum um sjálfið og ‘hina’ með það að markmiði að byggja upp kenningaramma til að skoða Rus-konur í arabískum heimildum. Þær eru í grunninn tvíþættar: annars vegar birtast Rus-konur í arabískum heimildum sem fórnir í helgiathöfnum, eða sem lifandi manneskjur. Með þetta að grunni, mun ég einnig skoða kynjahlutverk og kenningar um konur í kalífati Abbasíða á sama tíma, og skapast þannig eins konar þverfagleg rannsókn á því hvernig Rus-konur birtast okkur í arabískum heimildum.

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In May 2010, an article I wrote at school impressed my Grandad so much that he read the entire thing out to his brother over the phone. The piece of work I'm handing in this May is considerably longer than that article was, but I hope he would have been just as proud of it.

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1. Introduction

Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān’s visceral account of a Rus’ funerary sacrifice has become an enduring image of the Viking Age. It is frequently drawn on as an academic source, and the National Museum of Denmark recently utilised some of the more sensationalist aspects of this source in its ‘Meet the Vikings’ exhibition (Sindbæk 2019). For modern audiences, Ibn Faḍlān’s account of female sacrifice holds lasting appeal. Alongside our fixation on Viking warrior women (Price et al. 2019; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2018; Gardeła 2013), female sacrifice forms a crucial aspect of popular imaginings of women in the Viking world. In this worldview, we see women either as helpless victims or as victimisers themselves, located in an environment of Viking brutality (Price 2015).

Ibn Faḍlān was not describing a “Viking” woman, however. His sacrificial victim lived among the Rus’. Nor was he alone, as an Arab writer, in penning an account of Rus’ cultural practices. The Rus’, or Rusiyyāh, formed part of the Viking diaspora (Jesch 2015). The sources on the Rus’, however, are distinct from those on Viking-Age Scandinavia, and therefore merit independent treatment.

Various Arabic historical and geographical works make reference to the Rus’ (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013); archaeology and the written sources demonstrate that trade brought the Rus’ into contact with the Islamic world, Byzantium, and surrounding regions (Noonan 1990; Pritsak 1977). Ibn Faḍlān’s account, which discusses human sacrifice, has been referenced frequently in studies on the Viking Age. Deeper engagement with Arabic sources on the Viking Age, however, has been an ongoing development.¹ One aspect of these sources which has been overlooked is their presentation of Rus’ women, and the filtration of Rus’ gender roles through Arabic understandings of this foreign and barbaric culture.

This thesis tracks gender roles and female visibility across Arabic sources which discuss the Rus’. Having established the historical background of these sources, I will turn to discussion of appropriate theoretical backgrounds for this textual analysis (Chapter Two). On the basis of my close readings of the sources, Chapters Three and Four will present Arabic representations of women, divided according to whether or not the women involved were

¹ In recent years, scholarship by James Montgomery, Thorir Jonsson Hraundal, and Nizar Hermes has foregrounded the Arabic sources in their own right, seeking to draw attention to these sources where they are otherwise overlooked or not considered substantially.

sacrificial victims. Following this, Chapter Five will seek to contextualise these findings against the backdrop of ‘Abbasid gender roles.

1.1 The Rus’

The Rus’ were located in what is today Russia and the Ukraine (Duczko 2004, 2). This primarily mercantile group was active along the Volga and the Dniepr rivers, playing an instrumental role in the foundation of towns such as Staraja Ladoga and Rurikovo Gorodische (Callmer 2017). The historiography of the Rus’, however, is immensely complicated and highly politicised (Klejn 2013).

The 839 entry of the *Annales Sancti Bertiani* is generally accepted as the earliest extant reference to the ‘Rus’ (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 55). The annal refers to a Byzantine embassy to the court of Louis the Pious at Ingelheim, which was accompanied by a series of *Rhos* men (Duczko 2004, 16). Investigation reveals that these men “belonged to the people of the Swedes” (Nelson 1991, 44).

Thus began a centuries-long fixation on the origins of the so-called *Rhos*. These are the people who the Arabic sources appear to discuss; they use the terms *ar-Rus* and *ar-Rusiyyah* (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 54). To consider a tenth-century Arabic statement of what was understood by *Rus’*, we may look to al-Mas’ūdī: “The Rūs are many nations of many kinds. Some of them are a race called the Northmen and they are the majority. They frequent, as traders, Spain, Rūmia, Constantinople and the Khazar” (Samarrai 1959, 86-7).

The Rus’ are often identified as “Vikings”,² operating along long-distance trade routes between Scandinavia, Byzantium, and Baghdad (Noonan 1991). The accepted Viking-Age narrative on the Rus’ maintains that Scandinavian traders established towns such as Staraja Ladoga out of earlier, temporary trade encampments (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2009, 160). In this way, the Rus’ have been framed as ‘pure’ Vikings (Duczko 2004, 128). Termed the Normanist view of Rus’ history, this position maintains a strong Scandinavian influence in the ultimate formation of the Russian state (Pritsak 1977).

² This terminology is itself highly loaded: aside from criticisms which highlight that the term represented only those individuals who went raiding, Croix and Svanberg suggest that searching for “Viking” expansion has often carried nationalist and white supremacist motivations (Croix 2015, 90; Svanberg 2003), fuelling the co-opting of Viking-Age imagery and narratives by the far right (Kim 2019).

The Varangian, or Normanist, controversy, has played out in a variety of spheres over a number of centuries. Based along an east-west dichotomy, it has centred around discussion of the origins of, ultimately, the Russian state (Pritsak 1977, 249). Both sides of the debate have been politically co-opted; an anti-Normanist stance, prioritising the distinctly Slavonic origins of the Slavic state, was especially promoted by Soviet-era Russia (Klejn 2013, 30). The most extreme iteration of the reverse, Normanist, view was forwarded by fascist Adolf Hitler, who argued, within his Aryan supremacist ideology, that only a culture such as the “Vikings” could have been the originators of the Russian state (Androshchuk 2008, 529). The impact of this fierce debate over the ethnic origins of the Rus’ and their role in the foundation of the Russian state has been a stifling of academic conversation to suit political ends. The debates’ polarising nature has frequently forced scholars to commit decisively to one camp or the other with regard to the background of the Rus’.

For the purposes of this paper, I feel it is reductive and inappropriate to offer more than a brief recap of this lengthy and complex argument relating to modern ideas about ethnicity and nation. This thesis is not concerned with modern senses of boundary, but with medieval understandings of Otherness. It is sufficient to acknowledge the strong Scandinavian composition and character of these early Rus’ settlements, and to recognise that the position of the Rus’ within the Viking diaspora played an integral role in fostering western academic discourse on the Rus’ and the Arabic sources which discuss them (Duczko 2004, 1).

1.2 Arabic Sources on the Rus’

My focus in this study is Arabic descriptions of the Rus’. For the purposes of maintaining a distinct corpus of sources, I do not discuss Arabic sources emerging from Umayyad al-Andalus (Price 2008, 463). Whilst sources such as at-Tartushi and al-Ghazal describe, or purport to describe (Pons-Sanz 2004), Viking-Age Scandinavians, their work arises out of different geographical and literary traditions to those originating in the ‘Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad. Moreover, my sources are largely contemporary, and often related to each other on the basis of textual transmission. As such, they form a coherent body of thought on the Rus’. In selecting Arabic sources for this study, I have conducted close readings of Arabic ethnographic and travel accounts in translation, in order to identify references to Rus’ women. These sources are detailed below.

Prior to this, it is worthwhile to draw attention to some Islamic frameworks for geographical and ethnographic works. First, the concepts of *Dār al-Islām* (The House of Islam) and *Dār al-Harb* (The House of War) (Kennedy 2016, 104). This framing of the world established the “foreign” and Other as barbaric and violent. It has, however, perhaps been over-emphasised as a structure for mediating the violence of the Other; the conflicting states of Islam and “War” were not diametrically opposed to each other, but alluded to the vertical relationship between mankind and God (Bennison 2007, 159). Nevertheless, it is a useful basis for understanding conceptions of the non-Islamic world; an in-built sense of Otherness could be constructed in large part on the basis of faith.

Another useful framework for comprehending the world is the theory of the Seven Climes. Originally an Ancient Greek geographical construct, this divided the world into seven climatic zones (Hermes 2012, 45; al-Azmeh 1992, 6-7). In each zone, the climate affected the Four Humours differently. This was particularly true of those climes furthest from the Fourth Clime (where Baghdad was situated), in which extreme climates contributed to a serious humoral imbalance. The result of humoral imbalance was an impaired propensity towards civilisation. This theory does not factor into the work of all of the authors in this study, but is an important reference point for the understanding of the north as inherently barbaric and uncivilised. Moreover, it influences the transmission of some of these works; Amīn Razī, for example, organised his work (which quotes Ibn Faḍlān) geographically on the basis of the climes (Berthels *EI2*).

1.2.1 Ibn Faḍlān

In the context of studies of the Viking world, our best-known Arab author is Ibn Faḍlān. An eyewitness observer, in the year 921 AD Ibn Faḍlān was dispatched from the heart of al-Muqtadir’s caliphate in Baghdad, in some kind of ambassadorial capacity (Montgomery 2000, 1). His journey was prompted by a request from the king of the Volga Bulghārs for monetary and spiritual support, and led Ibn Faḍlān as far north as the Volga River. This was a lengthy journey, lasting until 922 AD (Hermes 2012, 82).

The journey was prolonged due to diplomatic complications. The money promised to the Volga Bulghārs failed to materialise, and so Ibn Faḍlān and his party became extended guests of the Bulghār king (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 21-2). How the journey ended is not known; the account breaks off mid-narrative.

The result of Ibn Faḍlān’s journey and observations is his *Risala*. He produced this travelogue with the aim of reporting on the customs of the people he visited (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 3). His account is unparalleled. It offers extended accounts of much of what he witnessed, and often includes reported speech. Undoubtedly the most famous aspect of the *Risala* is his account of a lengthy Rus’ funeral ritual involving human sacrifice. It is on the basis of this particular excerpt, and its parallels with Norse practices, that Ibn Faḍlān has been so widely referenced by scholars of the Viking world (Hillerdal 2009, 81).

The *Risala* appears to have circulated for a time in parts of the Islamic world. Yāqūt’s thirteenth-century geographical treatise, which quotes from the *Risala*, claims that the text “is well known and popular with people. I saw many copies of it” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 42). The text is known in quotation form from the work of four geographers: Yāqūt, al-Qazwīnī, Aḥmad Ṭūsī, and Amīn Rāzī (Simonsen 1981, 13-14). Yāqūt and Amīn Rāzī are of particular interest, Yāqūt because his quotations were until 1923 the most comprehensive source of Ibn Faḍlān’s text, and Amīn Rāzī because his sixteenth-century geographical work has offered slight variations and additions to the original textual material (Dunlop 1950, 307; Smyser 1965, 95). The Mashhad manuscript, rediscovered in 1923 by Ahmad Zeki Validi Togan, provides a fuller version of Ibn Faḍlān’s *Risala* (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2014, 69). This forms the basis for most translations of the *Risala*, with Yāqūt’s quotations used as a supportive prop for emendations and missing words.³

1.2.2 Al-Istakhrī

Just as with Ibn Faḍlān, we know barely anything about al-Istakhrī. Belonging to the Balkhī School of geographical texts which had been fostered by an earlier geographical scholar, Balkhī, al-Istakhrī appears to have travelled across the eastern Islamic world before furthering Balkhī’s work (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 80-1; Lunde and Stone 2012, 153). Writing c. 951 on the Rus’, the Khazars, and neighbouring tribes in his *Kitab al-Masalik wa l-Mamalik*, al-Istakhrī’s work was used as a key source of information by Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Muqaddasi later in the tenth century (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 80).

1.2.3 Al-Mas’ūdī

Al-Mas’ūdī was another well-travelled Arab author (Lunde and Stone 2012, 128; Shboul 1979, 78). He composed many geographical and historical works, resulting in a reputation as

³ Throughout this thesis, I rely primarily on Montgomery’s translation of the *Risala*, with reference also to Togan’s translation, and subsequent translations by Canard and McKeithen.

the “Herodotus of the Arabs” (Mackintosh-Smith 2019, 279; Pellat *EI2*). He mentions the Rus’ in his universal history, *Muruĵ al-dhahab wa ma’adin jawhar*, first drafted in 943 and revised in 947 and 956 (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 76). This draws on a variety of sources from the ninth and early tenth centuries, and identifies the Rus’ as the *majūs* who raided al-Andalus (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 79).

1.2.4 Ibn Ḥawqal

Ibn Ḥawqal was a tenth-century Arab geographer and cartographer (Ducène *EI3*). He met and was greatly influenced by al-Istakhrī, expanding on his geography in his own work (Ducène *EI3*). His *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, or *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, survives in three very distinct editions. This work was highly influential for many subsequent geographers (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 82).

1.2.5 Ibn Rusta

Ibn Rusta is the earliest of the authors discussed in this study. Writing between 903 and 913, his historical and geographical encyclopaedia, *Kitāb al-A’lāq al-nafīsa*, contained seven volumes (Maqbul *EI2*). Only one of these volumes survives, and it is in this that we find information on the Rus’, albeit in a manner deemed haphazard (Montgomery 2001, 74). Ibn Rusta was a follower of the Jayhani tradition, so-named for a contemporary geographer whose work served as a critical source of geographical methodology (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 71-3). It is thought that the information Ibn Rusta utilises in his description of the Rus’ and neighbouring tribes was an anonymous composition from around 860 (Lunde and Stone 2012, 116).

1.2.6 Marwazī

Marwazī is the latest of the sources discussed here. Alive in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, he was certainly not a contemporary observer (Lunde and Stone 2012, 182). He discusses the Rus’ in his *Tabāi’ al-hayāwān*, a zoological encyclopaedia which begins with some anthropological material (Lunde and Stone 2012, 182). In this, he quotes directly from Ibn Rusta as a continuant of the Jayhani tradition (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 72), but also offers up some additional information on the Rus’. Accordingly, I have included Marwazī’s work on the basis of these additions. The other, earlier sources discussed in this study are themselves frequently preserved in much later manuscripts, for reasons including the continued dissemination of texts and the poor preservation of paper manuscripts

(Robinson 2003, 31). My priority here is on the dissemination and framing of knowledge about the Rus', and Marwazī is a useful contributor to this discussion.

1.2.7 Miskawayh

Miskawayh is a tenth-century Persian writing in Arabic (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 79; Arkoun *EI2*). A multi-disciplinary intellectual, Miskawayh was an experienced philosopher and historian (Arkoun *EI2*). His account of the Rus raid on Bardha'a in 943, forming part of his *Tajārib al-umam*, a universal history, appears to have drawn from a range of sources (Arkoun *EI2*). In particular, it is evident that he elaborated on al-Mas'ūdī's account of the same event (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 79).

2. Theoretical Models

This study deals with perceptions of gender transmitted through a framework of Otherness. As such, an awareness of some theoretical concepts is necessary. A crucial aspect of this study is the recognition of the distance and boundaries between the people being described and those describing them. This chapter outlines some key theoretical tenets drawn on in my analysis in order to establish an appropriate framework for the consideration of the female Other in an imperialist context.

2.1 Approaching Medieval Gender

It is helpful to start by discussing gender. After an initial fight for visibility in medieval gender studies (Smith 2004, 9), the field has flourished in recent decades. A number of feminist works have addressed the Viking diaspora, laying groundwork for this study by foregrounding instances in which women are visible. For my purposes, Jesch's discussion of foreign sources on Viking women is particularly useful in that it collates some of the Arabic sources on the Rus' (Jesch 1991). This, in conjunction with recent translations and the increased utilisation of various theoretical concepts by medievalists, facilitates the work of this thesis. They enable gender analysis in these sources, and facilitate the application of a multi-theoretical lens in order to better tackle these sources as accounts of a cultural Other.

Jesch characterises these sources as “presenting Vikings through foreign, and sometimes uncomprehending, eyes” (Jesch 1991, 4). This is emblematic of much of the work undertaken on these sources from a Viking-studies perspective; by seeking out a multitheoretical approach, we can gain a more nuanced view of Rus' women presented in the Arabic sources.

First, it is helpful to approach ideas of early medieval gender. A crucial outline comes from Clover; she presents medieval gender as more abstract than twentieth- and twenty-first-century binarisations, especially in relation to the question of whether there was any properly specified conceptualisation of “womanhood” (Clover 1993, 386-7). Whilst acknowledging that Clover offers a northern-European framework, which cannot be accurately applied to our Arabic accounts, it is a useful starting-point for establishing Rus' women acting in a variety of roles and contexts. In understanding that what we are seeking from the Arabic sources is not a single, formally enshrined female Rus' archetype, we can better approach women's social roles. It emphasises the risk of being too rigid in constructing ideas about gender and

sexuality (Voss 2000, 186); whilst the construction of archetypes is necessary in order to establish a framework for Arabic perceptions of Rus' gender, there is a risk of over-generalisation. As this study will show, Rus' women in the Arabic sources are popularly depicted as victims of sacrifice during male burials, but this is by no means the only role they assume.

Working on women in Old Norse literature, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir helpfully voices the pitfalls of approaches which adhere too strictly to a fixed idea of gendered roles:

The often narrow scope of texts considered in critical discussion of Old Norse women has produced skewed results. Because of the notion of power as an aggressive force, research on “powerful” women in Old Norse literature has tended to focus only on the sagas that contain many female inciters, in addition to individual goading scenes from lesser-known texts. Yet the conclusions drawn from these investigations are often represented as applying to female roles and images of women in “the sagas” as a whole. This methodology effectively ignores the many other representations of women (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 16).

We can consider this in conjunction with Mägi and Jesch, who suggest that female slaves and sacrificial victims are the only Rus' women discussed with any substance in the Arabic sources (Mägi 2018, 204; Jesch 1991, 118). A key barrier to discussion of Rus' women has been the brevity of written descriptions of them, and this polarising approach sees Rus' women as either sacrificed slaves *or* brooch-wearing women, hampering nuanced discussions of Rus' women. A rigid approach to gender and sexuality overlooks women who do not fall into expected patterns of presentation. Female sacrificial victims form a key part of this study, by virtue of the fact that so many of the Arabic sources focus on this role. However, this specific female role, and the circumstances leading to it, must be situated against other contextual factors as well as other examples of visible Rus women in the Arabic sources.

That the Arabic sources and modern scholarship distinguish so sharply between free and enslaved women means a key aspect of my gender analysis will consider the status of Rus' women. As part of this, I will draw on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in order to recognise women within different social roles (Butler 1990, 339). This is crucial to my construction of how gender roles were understood by the Arab authors; the genders of the slaves and free women discussed by these authors are constructed differently and thus firmly differentiated. This is in large part the result of gender roles being performed differently

inside different social spheres. Gender performativity is particularly pertinent in the case of those writers who enjoyed face-to-face interactions with the Rus'. The way in which cultural performance led to perceptions and constructions of gender is an important issue for this study. Further reflection in this respect is required in terms of the nuanced and highly performative gender roles in evidence in the 'Abbasid court (El Cheikh 2004; 2005; 2015; Bray 2004; Rowson 2003). By highlighting the performative nature of these gender roles, I will present the reception of Rus' gender values by Arabic authors as an extension of the same understandings about gender, albeit through a foreign and often Othered gaze.

2.2 Gender and Ethnicity

Medieval gender studies has in recent decades looked to the analytical lens of intersectionality as an answer to the overlap between gender and postcolonial studies. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to dissect the multiple vectors of oppression affecting African-American women, and drawing also on Patricia Hills Collins' "matrix of domination", this analytical approach evaluates gender, race, and class as vectors by which power and oppression are determined (Nash 2008, 11; Crenshaw 1989; 1991). As an answer to the gulf between critical analysis on gender and race, intersectional analysis emphasised the need for a movement away from a "single-issue framework" (Crenshaw 1989, 152) for rendering oppression and discrimination. It particularly highlighted that the experiences of Black women were not fully represented or recognised by either feminist theory or antiracist discourse (Crenshaw 1989).

Having become something of a "scholarly buzzword" (Nash 2008, 3), an intersectional framework of analysis has gained traction among medievalists. This has had some uses, in highlighting the need for a multi-theoretical approach. The edited volume *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, for example, works on this basis in its cross-cultural gender analysis (Smith 2004). Other edited volumes have proceeded similarly. Certainly, this is a useful step, and represents forward progress in medieval gender studies; it generally signifies an attempt to add nuance to studies of gender. It has been noted that there is a need for this theoretical lens to be applied outside of the confines of American legal studies (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013, 795). However, concerns have been raised surrounding the uprooting of this framework from its original context and distancing intersectionality from its grounding in race and gender (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013,

789); some discussions of medieval “intersectionality” lack an awareness of the context in which this framework originated, and fail to reference the scholars who developed this theory. Further, they deliberately omit reference to race and ethnicity, citing these issues as politically fraught and too heavily rooted in a contemporary political frame (Farmer 2003, ix). Whilst the question of labels in Medieval studies has been much-debated (Bartlett 2001), it is inappropriate to apply an intersectional theoretical framework without due consideration of its original political context. Refusal to acknowledge race is dangerous:

The short answer is that the use of the term *race* continues to bear witness to important strategic, epistemological, and political commitments not adequately served by the invocation of categories of greater generality (such as *otherness* or *difference*) or greater benignity in our understanding of human culture and society. *Not* to use the term *race* would be to sustain the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name the past differently. Studies of “otherness” and “difference” in the Middle Ages – which are now increasingly frequent – must then continue to dance around words they dare not use; concepts, tools, and resources that are closed off; and meanings that only exist as lacunae (Heng 2018, 23).

Moreover, intersectionality is not shorthand for an amalgamated consideration of gender and ethnicity; rather, it refers to the workings of power and oppression. As Nash explains, intersectionality is “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Nash 2008, 2). This centralisation of oppression and subjectivity is something which is often missing from uses of this theoretical framework in Medieval studies.

Whilst, following Heng’s arguments, it is not inappropriate to raise questions of race and ethnicity, perhaps it is inappropriate to assign judgements of oppression. In this vein, then, it must be questioned whether such a framework is right for this study; this study aims to identify gender roles and values as identified by foreign observers, and does not seek to offer judgement on the oppression which was (or not, as the case may be) experienced by Rus’ women. Although I discuss Rus’ slaves at length, I do not do so with a view to adjudicating their oppression, or as a means of investigating *why* they lack power. An awareness of intersectionality and its relationship with the field of Medieval studies is useful in foregrounding the interacting vectors of gender and ethnicity in forming an identity. Understanding that Rus’ women were *foreign* women is integral to my analysis of these

sources. An intersectional analytical lens is not, however, a suitable theoretical underpinning for my purposes, in that it refers to oppression rather than perceptions of identity.

2.3 Imperial Gazes

A useful situating of gender and ethnicity comes from Phillips' article on Mongol warrior women in the Medieval European imagination. She writes:

These [foreign women warriors] were not treated as unnatural or perverse in the way that European viragos had come to be because they stood outside of the European framework of gender norms. On the other hand, they were not held up as especially admirable or exemplary. They excited the imagination, but not emulation (Phillips 2011, 194).

This is a helpful verbalisation of the idea that people viewed the gender values of their own society differently to those of other societies. Coming from a background of postcolonial studies and work on Medieval Orientalism, the above statement bears parallels with the situation of the Arab authors of this study; like European writers on the warrior women of “barbaric” foreign cultures, Rus’ women were far removed from the gender values of the ‘Abbasid court. Conceptualisations of gender are thus presented within a distinctly “Othered” frame.

The problem with this is that for a considerable period of time, prevailing scholarly attitudes have maintained that the Other, and the idea of a civilised gaze looking outwards towards “barbarity”, were exclusively Western constructs. One of the hangovers of Western imperialism has been an enduring attitude that “casting one’s curious eye towards the Other is a distinctively European virtue, a gift of Europeans to humanity at large” (Hermes 2012, 1-2). This is inaccurate; as Hermes notes, “the West has long been the object of the gaze of easterners” (Hermes 2014, 58).

Certainly, texts on the northern and western Other such as those considered in this study do not carry the same imperialist overtones as modern western imperialist discourse, or even medieval western European ruminations on the Other. Moreover, the Rus’ were geographically distant from their Eastern observers, and so not immediately accessible enough to be perceived as a cultural or political threat. As Thorir Jonsson Hraundal states, “peoples that are marginal to their worldview, such as the Rus, had little direct impact on the immediate social circumstances of our authors. In turn, the same authors had little reason to

distort their accounts in a way that might be ascribed to politically or otherwise influenced bias” (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 5). Just as western Europeans could revel in the perceived barbarity of Mongol warrior women due to their safe distance from “reality,” the Rus’ could be freely reflected on because they were so distant as to verge on fictitious in the minds of the readers of these texts.

That is not to say, however, that the consideration of imperialism becomes irrelevant as a result of the geographical distance between subject and text or the lack of colonising intent. The Arabic texts considered in this study are the product of an empire, and this is evident in the way in which the Other is presented. The Other is often conceptualised through mediations of the familiar and unfamiliar, and is heavily influenced by an understanding of one’s own self (Euben 2006, 19). This is important; authors worked to define their sense of self through comparisons with the Other. This established what their own culture was and was *not*, shoring up cultural boundaries.

This does not mean that accounts of the Rus’ were intentionally fabricated so as to provide a reflection on the Arab self; rather, it reflects the imperial background of those writing about the Rus’. These texts need to be understood within an imperial framework, recognising that mediating the gulf between self and Other would have caused writers to reflect on cultural differences. The aim of this study is not in the mining of these sources for factual details which can be corroborated with other sources of evidence on the Rus’; instead, I am considering how outside observers perceived and constructed Rus’ gender. An awareness of how an Islamic imperial background impacted on the tone and presentation of these sources is crucial.

It is one thing to recognise in our Arab authors an imperial gaze equivalent to that of medieval European literature. It is quite another to integrate this firmly into the context of medieval Islamic society. Berman draws attention to the imperial backdrop of Ibn Faḍlān’s *Risala*. She suggests that he intentionally focused on foreign customs that would shock his Muslim readership. Although providing an eyewitness account, he utilised a series of stereotypes, often negative, in his commentary on the Other (Berman 2014, 102).

Our understandings of the Islamic gaze upon the Other must acknowledge the existence of an Arab imperial gaze in the first place, and, moreover, recognise the imperial complexity of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate. Although the *Risala* does not represent an incipient attempt to expand the reaches of an empire, the reactions of the writers in this study are still those of a people

working from a place of perceived civilizational superiority. Further, the dissemination of religion as is evidenced by the *Risala* is a political act in and of itself; simply by discussing his own religious practices, Ibn Faḍlān is fostering the possibility of imperial expansion. Conversion to Islam carried with it the opportunity for inclusion in the ‘Abbasid empire (Berman 2014, 103). From the outset, Ibn Faḍlān’s embassy is clearly defined as spiritually and politically motivated. However, because this movement towards the expansion of the Islamic empire does not represent a carbon copy of the processes of western imperial expansion, it is less readily recognised.

A key factor in the obfuscation of the imperial contexts in which these sources on the Rus’ were written is the ultimate collapse of the Islamic empire. Whereas cultural memory, and indeed the very real political consequences of western empires remain present in the contemporary collective consciousness, eastern imperialism receives far less attention from western scholars. Hermes presents this as a criticism of some aspects of postcolonial studies today: “the monolithic impression of modern postcolonial theories of Orientalism, [has] not only limited the complex relations between East and West to the latter’s colonialist ambitions in the lands of the Other but have also forgotten that every Self has its own Other and that every literature has its own alterity” (Hermes 2012, 35). Empires have existed outside of western Europe, and concomitant with these empires are the associated complexities of an imperial gaze.

Approaching this in my thesis, I will utilise the term “Ifrañjalism.” Coined by Hermes from the Arabic *al-ifrañja* (European), this centralises the eastern imperial gaze looking north and west (Hermes 2012, 8-9). More specifically, I will discuss an “Ifrañjalist Gaze.” This approach takes into account both the interpretation of performed gender roles by male observers and the underlying imperialism of this approach towards the northern Other in Arabic sources on the Rus’. It foregrounds both the issue of gender and that of ethnicity, enabling both vectors of identity to be considered in tandem. Throughout this study, a gender-conscious approach to the historical background of the sources on the Rus’ will therefore be applied, integrating the gender theories outlined above with the concept of the eastern imperial gaze on the west.

3. Female Sacrifice

The most widespread and substantial female Rus' archetype is the sacrificial victim. Where women are discussed in the Arabic sources, it is commonly as sacrifices within the context of high-status male burials. The following chapter unpacks the integral aspects of this popular Rus' stereotype, with a particular focus on Ibn Faḍlān's discussion of Rus' funerary practices, before exploring potential reasons for the popularity of this mode of representation for Rus' women.

3.1 “The Rūs are a people who burn their dead” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 59).

Beginning first with basic allusions to female sacrifice, I will focus on five key references to this usually gendered Rus' practice. These all belong to the tenth century: Ibn Rusta, al-Mas'ūdī, al-Istakhrī, Ibn Ḥawqal, and Miskawayh. Their references to female sacrifice are generally fleeting. Al-Istakhrī, for example, writes: “The Rūs are a people who burn their dead. Slave girls are burned with the wealthy of their own volition” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 159). Miskawayh is similar: “When one of [the Rus'] died they buried him with his arms, clothes and equipment, along with his wife or another of his women, and his slave, if he happened to be fond of him, as was their custom” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 151). Ibn Rusta, Ibn Ḥawqal, and al-Mas'ūdī elaborate slightly. Ibn Rusta's account is as follows:

When a leading man dies, they dig a hole as big as a house in which they bury him dressed in his clothes and wearing his gold bracelet, accompanying the corpse with food, jars of wine and coins. They bury his favourite woman with him while she is still alive, shutting her inside the tomb and there she dies (Lunde and Stone 2012, 127).

Al-Mas'ūdī offers still more information in his less culturally-specific account, referencing contemporary practices in India:

The pagans who live in this country belong to many different races, among which are the Saqāliba and the Rūs, who live in one of the two parts of the city. They burn their dead on pyres along with their horses, arms and equipment. When a man dies, his wife is burned alive with him, but if the wife dies before her husband, the man does not suffer the same fate. If a man dies before marriage, he is given a posthumous wife. The women passionately want to be burned, because they believe they will enter

Paradise. This is a custom, as we have already mentioned, that is current in India but with this difference there, the woman is not burned unless she gives her consent (Lunde and Stone 2012, 132).

This is comparable to Ibn Ḥawqal’s account, which states:

The Rūs are a people who burn themselves when they die. With their rich men the maidens are burned willingly as it is done in Ghanah and Kūghah and the regions of the land of India in Canoge and others (Samarrai 1959, 99).

In light of the textual transmission of these sources, the likely age of the information presented, and the specific nuances across each discussion of funerary sacrifice, it is worth addressing the various details presented in these accounts in detail. It appears that sacrifice is almost a mandatory aspect of Arabic accounts on the Rus’, but its exact manifestation differs across these sources.

3.2 “Who will die with him?” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 35).

First, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that sacrifice was not an exclusively feminine domain within Rus’ society, or across the Viking diaspora. Adam of Bremen, writing on eleventh-century ritual activity at Gamla Uppsala, Sweden,⁴ asserts that male sacrifices were in many situations preferable (Ellis Davidson 1999, 336-7). Adam claims: “The sacrifice is of this nature; of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort” (Adam of Bremen 1959, 208). Our Rus’ sacrifices appear less bloody, at least according to Arab writers. Looking at the Rus’ specifically, Ibn Rusta offers a broader approach to sacrifice in his discussion of non-funerary rituals only; he writes that medicine men “can order the sacrifice of women, men or horses to their creator” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 127).

Despite the apparent gender diversity of sacrificial victims across the Viking diaspora, in the case of funerary sacrifices by the Rus’ there appears to be an overwhelming tendency towards female sacrifice. Only Miskawayh and Ibn Faḍlān note the possibility of male sacrifices. In Miskawayh’s case, the accompanying caveat is that the deceased man must have been sufficiently fond of his male slave in order for sacrifice to occur. Miskawayh’s discussion of the gendered component of Rus’ funerary sacrifice presents some interesting distinctions. It is

⁴ As a commentator who was neither Scandinavian nor pagan, Adam of Bremen is similar to our Arabic authors in being an outside voice discussing the sacrificial practices of another culture.

noteworthy that he distinguishes between female sacrifices and the favoured male slaves, as this raises questions about the potential purposes of each sacrifice. Did the Rus', or Miskawayh at least, draw a firm line between the uses of a wife in the afterlife and the uses of a male slave? That the answer to who might be sacrificed rested on the personal opinion of the deceased is intriguing. In line with discussions in Chapter Five concerning male slaves in the 'Abbasid court, we might surmise that Arab authors understood Rus' sacrificial practices as being sexually motivated.

Having established that at least under an Ifranjalist gaze, female sacrifice was considered more common, a further question arises: which women did the Rus' sacrifice? Whilst Ibn Faḍlān focuses exclusively on slaves as sacrificial victims, the other Arabic sources offer various combinations of spouses and slaves. Al-Istakhrī only discusses female slaves, and Ibn Rusta and Ibn Ḥawqal do not offer extensive clarity. Miskawayh and al-Mas'ūdī, however, appear to offer wives and female slaves interchangeably, alluding to the practice of posthumous marriage. It is possible that marriage as a posthumous practice can be considered a key factor in the gender-based selection of slaves for funerary sacrifice. Where female slaves were selected, the argument can be made that their role within the funerary ritual was to serve as a wife for the deceased man. This leads to an interesting overlap in female roles. These sources refer to specific female roles even within the context of female funerary sacrifice, displaying considerable nuance given the comparative brevity of these accounts. Clearly, slave or wife was an important distinction to make, despite the overlap in who might become a sacrificial victim. There is evidently an important distinction to be made by the authors, in that they want to present both wives and slaves as the victims of this funerary practice, but this difference is not presented as having any real purpose.

This might suggest that neither wives nor slaves held more appeal for Arab writers in the context of a gruesome funeral. More pressing, perhaps, is the creation of a setting in which various women can meet a grisly end. Here, the question of consent becomes especially pertinent. Al-Istakhrī, al-Mas'ūdī, and Ibn Ḥawqal discuss the idea of these women being willing victims, though they appear to offer different interpretations of this issue. Specifying as to the willingness (or otherwise) of the sacrificial victims sensationalises these accounts; in either instance, these sources attest either to a barbaric people burning their women against their will, or to a people so lacking in basic values of civilisation that their women are eager to submit to often gruesome deaths as part of a cultural ritual.

3.3 “His wife is burned alive with him” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 132).

Arguably the focal point of morbid fascination with the Rus’ practice of female sacrifice is an understanding of precisely how the women were killed. Taken alongside reflections on the willingness of these women to undergo sacrifice, these details build captivating anecdotes on the most barbaric aspects of life in the northern world. Ibn Faḍlān goes to great lengths to explain how the slave girl was killed in his eyewitness account, as detailed below. Of the remaining accounts considered here, there is some discussion of precisely how victims were killed during the funerals of their husbands and masters. Al-Mas’ūdī notes, rather viscerally, that the deceased’s wife would be burned alive on the funeral pyre. Specifying that she would be alive for this ordeal is an attractive additional detail; al-Istakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal similarly mention burning, but do not specify whether or not the victims would still be alive at this stage in the ritual.

A different sacrificial scenario appears in Ibn Rusta, who describes Rus’ women being buried alive. This particular account contains an extensive listing of grave goods, essentially establishing the Rus’ leader’s favourite woman as an objectified component of his assemblage of grave goods and preserving the woman in a domestic context alongside the deceased’s household goods. This focus on dramatic deaths adds a tantalising facet to their accounts of the barbaric north. The Rus’ did not simply sacrifice their women; they subjected them to gruesome, painful, and prolonged deaths. This serves to foreground the pagan beliefs of the Rus’ and heightens the sense of Otherness created by the Arab authors in order to exoticize depictions of the north.

That variation exists across these accounts adds weight to the idea that the priority was a gruesome and moving death scene for the female sacrifices involved. Whilst variation may, in part, have been reflective of different geographical and historical traditions, I suspect the continued and varied fixation on Rus’ sacrifice catered to a morbid fixation on the barbaric Other.

3.4 “Sometimes they do more, so I was very keen to verify this” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 35).

As noted, Ibn Faḍlān’s *Risala* stands apart from the other Arabic sources, especially in relation to its funerary narrative. Whereas our other sources are limited in their discussion of

the intricate details of Rus' funerary rituals, Ibn Faḍlān occupies the privileged position of having actually witnessed a funeral. He expresses anthropological interest in the ritual concept, then proclaims his luck in being able to observe it: "I was told that they set fire to their chieftains when they die. Sometimes they do more, so I was very keen to verify this. Then I learned of the death of an important man" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 35).

As discussed, selective processes did not automatically focus on female slaves:

When the chieftain dies, the members of his household ask his male and female slaves, "Who will die with him?" One answers, "I will." At this point the words become binding. There is no turning back. It is not even an option. It is usually the female slaves who offer.

When the man I just mentioned died, they said to his female slaves, "Who will die with him?" One said, "I will" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 35).

Of particular note is the fact that this slave girl is the only Rus' woman whose speech is reported in an Arabic travelogue or geography. Further, a close reading of Ibn Faḍlān's *Risala* reveals that only one other woman is afforded the luxury of direct speech: the wife of the field marshal of the Ghuzziyyah Turks. We might assume that she was of a greater social standing than our Rus' slave girl. It is interesting that female speech in the *Risala* should be restricted to the Rus' and the Ghuzziyyah; Thorir Jonsson Hraundal suggests that Ibn Faḍlān considered them to be similar (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 118-9). With the Ghuzziyyah as with the Rus', female speech relates to processes surrounding deceased men:

I watched his wife, who had previously been the wife of his father, take some meat, milk, and a few of the gifts we had presented and go out into the open, where she dug a hole and buried everything, uttering some words. "What is she saying?" I asked the interpreter, and he replied, "She says, 'This is a gift for al-Qaṭaghān, the father of Atrak. The Arabs gave it to him.'" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 15).

Beyond this, Ibn Faḍlān refers only to communication with Bulghār women: "I spared no effort to exhort the women to cover themselves in the presence of the men, but that proved impossible" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 28). The specifics of this communication were evidently not worthy of preservation, perhaps because they resulted from Ibn Faḍlān's intervention and were not an uninfluenced cultural observance. Recorded female speech occurs only in instances where Ibn Faḍlān has observed something of major cultural interest. His recordings of female speech are accompanied by indications that he asked his interpreter for a direct

translation – this reflects his diligence as an anthropological observer, and also emphasises that he deemed these events worthy of observation, preservation and dissemination. Thus, Ibn Faḍlān reports the slave girl’s speech because it falls within the narrative of an exciting ritual which he was eager to witness first-hand, and because her ritual behaviour was intriguing and unusual:

I quizzed the interpreter about her actions and he said, “The first time they lifted her up, she said, ‘Look, I see my father and mother.’ The second time she said, ‘Look, I see all my dead kindred, seated.’ The third time she said, ‘Look, I see my master, seated in the Garden. The Garden is beautiful and dark-green. He is with his men and his retainers. He summons me. Go to him.’” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 36-7).

Previous focus on this speech has approached it with a view to dissecting the extent to which it does or does not correlate with reconstructions of Old Nordic belief (Duczko 2004, 146; Petrukhin 2007b, 68; Schjødt 2007, 142). For the purposes of my study, it is valuable as a unique example of female speech among the Rus’. This woman was clearly an integral part of the ritual proceedings. From the moment she volunteers to be sacrificed, she becomes the living focus of this ritual, attended to by two female slaves.

The other key female figure in this ritual, the Angel of Death, will be discussed in the following chapter. For now, we might argue that the focus on the slave girl and her speech forms part of an attempt to foreground the most gruesome aspects of this ceremony. The sacrificial killing clearly affects Ibn Faḍlān. His description of the ritual’s climax is tense and dramatic:

The men approached with shields and sticks and handed her a cup of alcohol. Before drinking it she chanted over it. The interpreter said to me, “Now she bids her female companions farewell.” She was handed another cup which she took and chanted for a long time. The crone urged her to drink it and to enter the yurt where her master was lying. I could see she was befuddled. She went to enter the yurt but missed it, placing her head to one side of the yurt, between it and the boat. The crone took hold of her head and entered the yurt with her. The men began to bang their shields with the sticks, so that the sound of her screaming would be drowned out. Otherwise, it would terrify the other female slaves and they would not seek to die with their masters (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 37).

I would suggest that the decision to assign extensive reported speech to the slave girl is part of an attempt to humanise her. It emphasises that she is very much alive during this ceremony, making her death even more shocking for those reading the *Risala*. In foregrounding the actions and experiences of the sacrificial victim – who was marked for death at the beginning of the funerary segment – this account heightens the reader’s awareness of the victim as human, and defenceless. Ibn Faḍlān notes that consent for the sacrifice, once given, cannot be revoked. The sexual elements of this ritual have been variously interpreted as an orgy and as gangrape (Smyser 1965, 111; Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2014, 84); in the slave girl’s state, drugged and unable to revoke her consent for participation in the ritual, her willingness to participate in these sexual acts surely did not affect the ritual.

Where we clearly see, or rather hear, unwillingness on the part of the slave girl is in her final moments. Ibn Faḍlān interprets the auditory elements of the ritual’s culmination as a means of drowning out the slave girl’s screams, thus preventing future reluctance among female slaves when they should be called on as sacrificial volunteers. Arguments have been made that Ibn Faḍlān was mistaken here; he apparently did not understand that the beating of shields was a ritual behaviour (Duczko 2004, 151). Ibn Faḍlān disagrees. He has consistently proved, both with the Rus’ and among other cultures, that he is eminently capable of communicating using a translator. A translator is prominently placed throughout the Rus’ funeral. As such, I would suggest that Ibn Faḍlān made a very deliberate interpretation here: did he genuinely understand the beating of the shields as a mechanism for drowning out the slave girl’s screams, or was he imposing a sensational take on the ritual he witnessed? Characterising the banging of the shields as a sinister mechanism to drown out the sounds of a violent act would have fed into overall perceptions of Rus’ funerary practices as barbaric and uncivilised.

This practice of obscuring the sounds of the slave girl’s suffering casts the Rus’ women sacrificed in funerary contexts as helplessly ignorant, and abdicates them of responsibility for the barbarism perpetuated by Rus’ men; as will be discussed in the following chapter, female Rus’ slaves were frequently exposed and forced into engaging in public sexual acts. In the case of Rus’ women, these scandalous acts are perpetrated only by men. Since only slave girls are involved in these scandalous activities, and since they cannot be imbued with any sense of power or agency in the contexts in which they are presented, it is only the men who may be seen to exhibit what Ibn Faḍlān viewed as depraved proclivities. Male responsibility

for this behaviour can be considered a gendered construct unique to the Rus'; earlier in the *Risala*, he is utterly horrified by a Ghuzziyah woman:

Their womenfolk do not cover themselves in the presence of a man, whether he be one of their menfolk or not. A woman will not cover any part of her body in front of anyone, no matter who. One day we stopped at a tent and sat down. The man's wife sat with us. During conversation, she suddenly uncovered her vulva and scratched it, right in front of us (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 10).

Whilst it falls to the men to explain her behaviour, this action is firmly attributed to the Ghuzziyah woman. Rus' women are not assigned this kind of responsibility for inappropriate actions, in any circumstance. I would argue, then, that Ibn Faḍlān works to present the Rus' slave girl as an unwitting victim; past precedent would have prevented her from hearing the screams of other sacrificed slave girls, and her ability to consent was incredibly minimal. Although the Angel of Death was involved in the running of the funeral ceremony, many of the key acts – sexual intercourse, and the strangulation of the slave girl – were perpetrated by men. Further, as I will argue in the following chapter, the Angel of Death existed outside of broadly accepted gender roles, and so does not fit with broader patterns of Rus' women as victims of barbaric male practices.

3.5 “I take no responsibility for this and similar statements he makes” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 42).

Ibn Faḍlān's description of female sacrifice accrues additional depth in Amīn Rāzī's version of the account. As discussed in Chapter One, Ibn Faḍlān's *Risala* survives in four iterations, with the Mashad manuscript and Yāqūt's quotations considered the most useful textual witnesses. This overlooks some minor variations in the less-discussed geography of Amīn Rāzī.

I approach this issue here because textual variation plays an important role in how we might understand the reception of key elements of the *Risala*. Manuscript variations shed light on how subsequent geographers and copyists might have interpreted the role of the sacrificed slave girl. Montgomery notes that since multiple versions of this work appear to have circulated, it is necessary to establish “whether these versions are the product of the ‘author’ or the tradition” (Montgomery 2004b, 5).

At a basic level, this reminder of the intricacies of textual transmission is useful because Amīn Rāzī interprets the funeral narrative as some form of posthumous marriage (Smyser 1965, 95). This correlates with al-Mas'ūdī's account of Rus' funerary practices, and establishes the female participants in these funerary narratives as fulfilling a marital role. Whilst some scholars have dismissed Amīn Rāzī as a later writer and a logical interpolator, crediting him with the key additions in this variant, it is accepted that he was probably working from an earlier textual witness than Mashhad and Yāqūt (Smyser 1965, 95; Duczko 2004, 137). It is, therefore, unclear whether his version represents a narrative untainted by the gory demands of 'Abbasid copyists, or whether his sixteenth-century Persian readership preferred a sanitised account. Since Amīn Rāzī's contemporaries are known to have pressed him to publish his collated travel biographies (Berthels *EI2*), I suspect that the former is more likely. It would be surprising if a readership who demanded the publication of these travel narratives was averse to reading the full and uncensored accounts of foreign ritual practices.⁵

A major deviation in the Amīn Rāzī account is the description of the slave girl's sacrifice. In this account, the slave girl is recast as the dead man's wife, and her status is therefore firmly elevated. Further, her death is less sensationally violent than it is in the Mashhad manuscript:

After that, the group of men who have cohabited with the slave girl make of their hands a sort of paved way whereby the girl, placing her feet on the palms of their hands, mounts onto the ship. After that, they give her a hen, which she throws into the ship after tearing off its head. Then she drinks a cup of an intoxicating drink and pronounces many words, and, thrice standing on the palms of the men, she comes down and mounts again to the ship and recites many things. She goes into the pavilion in which her husband has been put, and six of the relatives of her husband go into the pavilion and unite sexually with this wife in the presence of the dead man. When they have finished these duties of love, the old woman who, according to the belief of these people, is the Angel of Death arrives and lays the wife to sleep beside her husband. Of the six men, two seize the legs of the slave girl, and two others her hands, and the old woman, twisting her veil, puts it around her neck and gives the ends to the two other men so that they can pull it so tight that the soul escapes from her body (Smyser 1965, 100).

⁵ Amīn Rāzī's *Haft Iqlīm*, moreover, does not actually cite Ibn Faḍlān as his source (Zadeh *EI3*). As such, it is possible that the account's anonymity carried a comfortable impression of having been almost mythological in tone.

The dramatic tone is noticeably absent; there are no sounds to be drowned out, and no other auditory effects. The nature of the sacrifice is also substantially altered. Amīn Rāzī's iteration of the slave girl is not stabbed. In the Mashhad manuscript we are told that, having prepared the strangling of the victim, the Angel of Death "advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in between her ribs, here and there, while the two men strangled her with the rope until she died" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 37). The removal of human bloodshed from the narrative is interesting. Since the actual sacrifice took place out of sight, we might assume that Ibn Faḍlān was conjecturing here anyway, lacking eyewitness evidence of the killing in the yurt. As such, this aspect of the account may already have been considered highly interpretative, and open to further interpretation as it moved through authorial and textual variations. Certainly, this textual variant offers a vastly scaled-back idea of the gravity of the event; she is presented as being laid down to sleep beside a man who is now her husband, not her master, and there is no discussion of a struggle or unwillingness on her part.

Indeed, this iteration of the slave girl is so peaceful that there is barely even any discussion of speech. This stands in opposition to the dominant *Risala* narrative in which, as discussed above, the slave girl is the travelogue's most loquacious female. The substitution of the doorway of the main narrative with the edge of the ship in the Amīn Rāzī version leads to the reduction of her utterances to mere recitations, rather than fully reported quotation. This, perhaps, is a casualty of the more peaceful, almost civilised tone of this narrative. As speculated above, the extensive speech assigned to the slave girl might have been a means of humanising her, centring focus on her in the immediate prelude to her death. In this version, in which the spousal aspect of her role is prioritised over the sacrificial, perhaps this is less necessary. By rewriting this ritual as a posthumous marriage, it takes on a less barbaric tone, and so is slightly less alien and Other. As a later editor of this text, perhaps Amīn Rāzī did not feel the same level of threat concerning this long-gone cultural Other.

Further to the civilising potential of alternate copies of the *Risala*, it is worthwhile to raise a key clarification offered up at the end of Yāqūt's quotations. Within his disclaimers concerning the factuality of Ibn Faḍlān's accounts, the geographer writes: "Nowadays, everyone knows that the Rūs practice Christianity" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 62). This is an interesting addition for two reasons. First, it implies widespread knowledge about the Rus', and is very offhand in its treatment of their religious conversion. More importantly, this information is presented as an addition at the end of the account of the Rus'. Yāqūt did not editorialise Ibn Faḍlān's quotations in order to reflect his updated information, nor did he

preface his account accordingly.⁶ Instead, he presented this violent funerary ritual, replete with pagan barbarism, before offering clarification. This is surely indicative of a keen appetite for grisly tales of the Other among Yāqūt’s Arabic readership.

3.6 “And there she dies” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 127).

The Arabic sources focus heavily on Rus’ funerary practices, particularly where female sacrifice is involved. Whilst archaeological evidence does not typically allow for identification of sacrifice, especially in the case of cremation burials, we certainly don’t appear to see enough double burials to corroborate the frequency of sacrificial burial suggested by the written material (Schetelig 1908-09; Price 2014, 186). For these Arab authors, however, female sacrifice was clearly an appealing end for Rus’ women.

Relevant to this discussion are indications of parallel practices within this corpus of sources. Al-Mas’ūdī and Ibn Ḥawqal make direct cultural comparisons. The former observes: “There is a custom, as we have already mentioned, that is current in India but with this difference: there, the woman is not burned unless she gives her consent” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 133). This is an interesting comparison. As I have discussed, cultural constructions of the Other are generally built around perceptions of one’s own self. In exploring that which is different, the goal is to learn more about oneself, rather than necessarily to learn about the opposing culture. This is amply reflected in Ibn Faḍlān’s post-funeral interlude. In reference to Arab burial practices, a Rus’ man remarks: “You Arabs, you are a lot of fools!” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 38). Closing the Rus’ funeral account in this way is a neat return to the familiar, rooting the discussion of funerary rituals in an exploration of how Rus’ and Islamic practices differed. Understandings of the Other are mediated by what is known and understood of the self.

Here, however, our point of comparison is another culture entirely, which similarly exists as Other within the cultural milieu of the author. That the Rus’ engage in behaviour comparable to cultures in India suggests that the accompanying characterisations of barbarism are not specific to the Rus’; this morbid fixation on sacrifice does not signal that the Rus’ themselves were extraordinary. Whilst the implication in al-Mas’ūdī’s discussion that Rus’ sacrifice is not a consensual practice characterises the Rus’ as a harsher and more forceful practitioner of

⁶ This may have been a side-effect of the integration of information on the Kievan Rus’ into the Arabic corpus of knowledge on the north. Information on the Kievan Rus’ probably first surfaced around 930 AD (Thorir Jonsson Hraundal 2013, 91), and it is possible that Yāqūt conflates information on the Kievan Rus’ with Ibn Faḍlān’s nomadic Rus’ on the Volga.

female sacrifice, the fact remains that the Rus' cannot be considered to stand out purely on these grounds.

Other discussions of female sacrifice relish the same points of horror. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, writing some four centuries after the sources discussed here, recorded his observations of female sacrifice in India in his *Rihla*. He emphasises the same scandalous elements as the sources on the Rus': the issue of consent, and exactly how the women died. He also offers multiple horrifying scenarios: "After the burning my companions came back and told me that she had embraced the dead man until she herself was burned with him" (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa 2002, 158). Still worse, and alarmingly active: "Thereupon she joined her hands above her head in salutation to the fire and cast herself into it" (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa 2002, 159).

It is interesting to see the prevalence of female sacrifice across Arabic ethnographic sources, and, moreover, to observe the gendered focus of these funerary anecdotes. In all cases – both in sources on the Rus' and in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla*, the focus is placed firmly upon the victims rather than their male companions. Although many of the women discussed in these sources are slaves, and so powerless in their own right, more time is devoted to discussing them than the men they are sacrificed at the behest of.

As a case in point, we can consider the *Risala*. It has been noted that one of Ibn Faḍlān's most frustrating omissions is the detail surrounding the deceased man (Smyser 1965, 113). He writes of the burial mound: "They wrote the man's name and the name of the king of the Rūsiyyah on it" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 38). With a view to gathering information on written language and identity, Ibn Faḍlān's failure to supply a name is frustrating. It is, however, indicative of the funeral's appeal; Ibn Faḍlān was not necessarily writing with the intention of recording the minutiae of the ritual, but was presenting a shocking account of female sacrifice. The Rus' man is only interesting as an insight into how corpses survive in cold climates. The slave girl, however, is a tantalising sacrificial lamb, an obvious choice of victim against the barbaric machinations of the Rus'. The men are not the outliers in this cultural practice; they die, and their bodies are disposed of per the dictates of their culture. Ibn Faḍlān expresses interest in the burial practices of multiple cultures; earlier in the *Risala* he gives a detailed, but not eyewitness, description of the burial practices of the Ghuzziyyah. Death rituals are a basic point of interest in cultural interaction, hence the discussion between Ibn Faḍlān and the Rus' man regarding their different funerary practices.

Death in itself, then, is not unusual or particularly barbaric, even where cremation occurs rather than inhumation. It is the practice of sacrifice which truly sensationalises Rus' death rituals. Sacrifice is the only form of female burial discussed, characterising women quite vividly as instruments for use in barbaric ritual practices. I would suggest that this zeal for presenting female sacrifice in Rus' burials forms something of a foundational stereotype for our Arabic sources. In a similar vein to modern anecdotes about bloodthirsty Vikings, exemplified by persistently hypermasculine popular culture representation of the Vikings as "manly men doing manly things in a manly way" (Sklar 2011, 128), perhaps this was a central fragment of information on which readers of these Arabic sources could focus their understanding. The Rus' were culturally and geographically distant from the 'Abbasid Caliphate, and so sensational cultural stereotypes could be relied upon as major informational gobbets.

Euben, discussing Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, suggests that the traveller hinges his observations of women on a series of opposites:

When women do appear, and they increasingly do, they are largely refracted through sets of binaries – veiled and naked, visible and secluded, aristocrats and slaves, learned and illiterate, rich and poor, autonomous and obedient – that overlap and intertwine (Euben 2006, 81).

As has been discussed in this chapter, some of these binaries – namely the barrier between free woman and slave – carry ample potential for overlap when we address perceptions of Rus' funerary sacrifice. But this overlap clears the way for the most significant binarization present in sources which deal with the Rus' sacrifice of women. Establishing Rus' women, both free and enslaved, as potential victims of gruesome sacrifice, creates a compelling sense of difference: between the men who mandated these rituals and the women who fell victim to their cultural mores, and also between the Rus' and our Arabic authors.

4. Other Depictions of Women

Continuing with the binary presentations discussed at the end of Chapter Three, we now approach other representations of Rus' women. Most simply, we see free and enslaved women. I will proceed on this basis in my preliminary assessment of the sources. Jesch notes that the Arabic sources generalise: "We rarely meet women in these Arab accounts and, when we do, it is as captured slave girls or as the sacrificial victims of suttee" (Jesch 1991, 118). I present female Rus' archetypes in greater depth here; whilst the focus on female sacrifice was a popular characteristic of Arab portrayals of Rus' women, the reality was far more complex.

4.1 "They take the women and enslave them" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 127).

Ibn Faḍlān provides some key details on Rus' slavery. The diplomat catalogues enslaved women in multiple contexts. As discussed in the previous chapter, Rus' slaves were particularly visible as funerary sacrifices. Here, I will discuss understandings of Rus' slaves as trade products, and as women with serving duties within the Rus' community.

In some respects, Rus' slaves horrified Ibn Faḍlān. In line with his general expectations of female modesty, expressed throughout the *Risala*, he is appalled by the public treatment of female slaves:

[The Rus'] are accompanied by beautiful female slaves for trade with the merchants. They have intercourse with their female slaves in full view of their companions. Sometimes they gather in a group and do this in front of each other. A merchant may come in to buy a female slave and stumble upon the owner having intercourse. The Rūs does not leave her alone until he has satisfied his urge (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 33).

Ibn Faḍlān's presentation of female slaves establishes them as goods for trade. Although it is impossible to pinpoint the ethnicity of the Rus' slave girls, their inclusion in basic community practices is grounds for considering them within the Rus' gender framework. This description differs from Ibn Rusta's, which appears not to convey the sexual horrors of Ibn Faḍlān's depiction: "They treat their slaves well and dress them suitably, because for them they are an article of trade" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 126). Implicit in both testimonies is an understanding of these women as tradeable commodities.

Ibn Faḍlān is certainly taken with the notion of Rus' slaves as sexual objects. A later description of female slaves, this time in the palace of the Rus' king, contributes to a

mesmerising tableau. On the basis of this section's relative brevity comparative to the funerary narrative, and in light of the conveniently round numbers presented in this segment, Ibn Faḍlān appears not to have witnessed this fantastical court personally:

It is one of the customs of the king of the Rūsiyyah to keep in his palace four hundred of his bravest comrades and most trusted companions beside him. They die when he dies and sacrifice themselves to protect him. Each one has a female slave to wait on him, wash his head, and provide him with food and drink, and a second one to have intercourse with. These four hundred companions sit below his huge couch, studded with precious stones. Forty concubines who belong to the king also sit on his couch. Sometimes he has intercourse with one of them in the presence of his comrades (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 38).

On the basis of this and his earlier observation, rooted in a mercantile environment, we can develop ideas about Ibn Faḍlān's attitude towards Rus' slaves, and specifically on his mediation of Rus' sexual mores. In the previous chapter, I discussed Ibn Faḍlān's disgust concerning female exposure among the Ghuziyyah. Ibn Faḍlān's reaction to this incident provides interesting fuel for consideration of how his Iفرانجالي Gaze, heightened as a direct observer, contributed to his construction of Rus' gender values. The Ghuziyyah episode is followed by a plea for forgiveness from Ibn Faḍlān for his sinful gaze. Hermes writes:

The question that one may raise here is why Ibn Fadlan has asked for repentance especially if we know that according to Islamic law *al-nadhra al-ula* (that is, the first inadvertent sight of a foreign woman) is *mubah* (permissible). Hence, it does not necessitate *istighfar*, which is asking for repentance. What is certain is that he has not just seen but rather gazed at the Oghuz woman's private parts, a thing that is *haram* (forbidden), thus it necessitates an act of repentance. If it is, Islamically speaking, illicit to look at unveiled women out of fear of *fitna* (sexual attraction), it is a graver *ma'siya* (disobedience) to gaze at the most sexual of (foreign) women's parts (Hermes 2012, 86).

It would perhaps be unwise to admit to such behaviour in a caliphal report. However, Ibn Faḍlān is purportedly dedicated to truthful recollection, so I am inclined to accept Hermes' interpretation of his indecent gaze. With this in mind, we can approach his understandings of the sexual components of Rus' slavery.

Ibn Faḍlān expresses his distaste with the Rus' merchants, who avail themselves regularly of their slave girls and, moreover, continue their sexual activities even when someone arrives to

purchase a slave. However, in his description of this sordid tableau we may read a hint of appeal: he describes the slave girls as beautiful. This is not the judgement of someone who is entirely appalled by what he has observed. In commenting on the appearance of the slaves, rather than restricting himself to scandalised judgement, Ibn Faḍlān must have liked what he saw. He is certainly pleased by the general physical appearance of the Rus'; he begins his description of them by observing: "I have never seen bodies as nearly perfect as theirs" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 32). It is unexpected to see this observation extended into a sexual setting.

It appears, then, that Ibn Faḍlān can separate these female slaves from the public sexual acts they were forced to engage in. This would align with their lack of control over their environment. It remains noteworthy that he should choose to comment in such detail on women who were doubtless exposed, but perhaps their lack of agency enabled him to present them as objects of aesthetic appeal even so. Possibly, much as Rus' sacrificial victims might have been safe to gaze on for the purposes of providing an anthropological account, Ibn Faḍlān might have justified his observation of these slaves similarly. By casting the sexual activity they were forced to engage in as an established Rus' cultural more, perhaps he was able to defend his observational practices to himself.

It is interesting that presentations of sex in Ibn Faḍlān differ substantially to those in the other Arabic sources. Miskawayh and al-Mas'ūdī discuss the taking of women as slaves, in contexts which might presage sexual activity of some sort. Al-Mas'ūdī, detailing a raid on the Caspian Sea c. 913, writes that the Rus' "seized women and children and property" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 145). Miskawayh is more explicit, noting of the Rus' raid on Bardha'a in 943: "They kept the women and boys, whom they raped and enslaved" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 149).

These accounts highlight the barbaric depravity of the Rus' men. Although later iterations of the Bardha'a account, by Ibn al-Athīr and Al-'Aynī (writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), suggest that only beautiful women were enslaved (Samarrai 1959, 132;152), these accounts lack the sense of allure and mystical setting present in the *Risala*. These elements would have served to glamorise the barbaric practices of the north. Therein lies a crucial difference between these sources and the *Risala*. Neither scenario presents consensual sexual activity. However, whereas the former render the violence of Rus' attacks, Ibn Faḍlān, writing on the Rus' at home and, moreover, interacting with them, can present a different image. This facilitates his Ifranjalist Gaze; he can exoticize the unfree women of the Rus'.

Their unusual beauty, and unusual visibility relative to the women of al-Muqtadir's caliphate, add glamour to this culture on the edge of the world.

This glamour, however, is not sustained through all of Ibn Faḍlān's descriptions of female slaves. His discussion of their involvement in Rus' washing rituals is completely overridden by disgust. In his exposition on unhygienic Rus' habits, he writes:

Every morning a female slave brings a large basin full of water and hands it to her master. He washes his hands, face, and hair in the water. Then he dips the comb in the water and combs his hair. Then he blows his nose and spits in the basin. He is prepared to do any filthy, impure act in the water. When he has finished, the female slave carries the basin to the man next to him who performs the same routine as his comrade. She carries it from one man to the next and goes around to everyone in the house (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 33).

This offers an illuminating insight into the Rus' use of slave labour. In this, we understand that Ibn Faḍlān perceives Rus' women as being attendant to issues of hygiene, regardless of how piecemeal the Rus' commitment to cleanliness might be. Perhaps as a result of his horror concerning Rus' cleanliness, the female slaves lose their allure and become props for the perpetuation of the notion that the Rus' "are the filthiest of all God's creatures" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 33).

In this instance, we might imagine that Ibn Faḍlān's faith and discomfort have superseded the entrancing nature of the Rus' slave girls. Abed discusses Ibn Faḍlān's use of *takamul*, a Qur'anic framework of complementarity wherein his decrial of unhygienic cultures was rooted in comparisons with his own practices. This helped him to navigate the logic behind the apparently uncivilised practices of cultures such as the Rus' (Abed 2018, 174-6). Abed attaches significant weight to Ibn Faḍlān's fixation on water rituals, suggesting that the strict preservation of his own washing routines was a crucial means of preserving his identity amidst the chaos of other cultures (Abed 2018, 186). In light of this, I would suggest that the Rus' slave becomes secondary to issues of hygiene. This was an opportunity for the use of *takamul*, to assist his readers in negotiating cultural difference. As a well-established concern throughout his *Risala*, it is unsurprising that in this instance Ibn Faḍlān would prioritise hygiene above a largely invisible female role. After all, this woman not doing anything particularly exotic or glamorous.

Our final discussion of female slavery in the Arabic sources is less image-focused, but raises perhaps the most interesting questions in relation to Arab constructions of Rus' gender roles. This occurs in Ibn Faḍlān's funerary account. Here, he discusses the two slaves responsible for the sacrificial victim discussed in the previous chapter: "So they put two other female slaves in charge of her, caring for her and accompanying her wherever she went, even to the point of washing her feet with their hands" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 35).

These slaves are categorised alongside the sacrificial victim, suggesting no distinct ritual role for them outside of this funeral. The role of these two slaves, even in this ritual context, therefore appears mundane. It perhaps reflects a furtherance of Ibn Faḍlān's concern with washing rituals, and offers basic detail on the funeral's participants. The second mention of these women, however, supplies interesting details:

They took her [the sacrificial victim] to the boat and she removed both of her bracelets, handing them to the woman called the Angel of Death, the one who would kill her. She also removed two anklets she was wearing, handing them to the two female slaves who had waited upon her, the daughters of the woman known as the Angel of Death (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 37).

At first glance, this reiterates what we already know: the role of these women is purely servile. It alludes to the idea that slaves could own property, in that they receive gifts from the victim. Most surprisingly, however, these women are described not only as slaves but as the daughters of the Angel of Death.

This description is fraught with issues. What are we to understand from this? Is the Angel of Death, as mother of the slaves, a slave herself? Or is her maternal role purely metaphorical, assumed for ritual purposes? This might correlate with her position as the only explicitly-identified middle-aged woman among the Rus, as we shall see below. Whatever the case here, the recognition of familial bonds among slaves is interesting, and perhaps speaks to long-term reproductive roles for these women in Rus' society. Furthermore, as will be outlined in Chapter Five, 'Abbasid social structures accommodated slaves even in caliphal family trees. This situation would not, then, be out of the ordinary for Ibn Faḍlān. The acknowledgement of a potential social structure here in which a family of slaves might be involved in the administering of a key ritual is an intriguing one, and suggests a framework of Rus' slavery which is more complex and nuanced than the violent raiding structure presented by other sources.

4.2 “I saw her myself” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 36).

Approaching the Angel of Death, we encounter a female figure unparalleled among the Arabic sources on the Rus'. Indeed, she is without comparison even among the male characters; whilst a relative of the deceased man lights the funeral pyre, he is not listed as a dedicated ritual specialist akin to the Angel of Death. Unlike her “daughters”, it is never suggested that she is a slave. Ibn Faḍlān's description of her is unusual; she is unlike the other Rus' women, who are eye-catching and beautiful:

An aged woman whom they called the Angel of Death turned up. She spread the coverings on the couch. It is her responsibility to sew the chieftain's garments and prepare him properly, and it is she who kills the female slaves. I saw her myself: she was gloomy and corpulent but neither young nor old (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 35-6).

Textile work falls under her responsibility as a ritual activity. As a rare reference to textile work among the Rus', this has fascinating ramifications for the discussion and visibility of women's work. That this should be listed alongside the slaughter of the human sacrifice is somewhat jarring, but perhaps emphasises the disturbing tenor of this affair; juxtaposing peaceful textile work with her more sinister ritual duties highlights the barbarity of this pagan practice.

Ibn Faḍlān's assertion that “I saw her myself” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 36) suggests that the Angel of Death is integral to the spectacle, and a noteworthy sight in her own right. His description does not allude to a beautiful appearance; instead, she is menacing. The focal point of this menacing description is *jawān bīrah*, in reference to her age, which is a complicated term to gloss. Montgomery treats it as an arabicized borrowing from a Persian term referring to female middle-age, noting its apparent negative connotations (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 75). Canard's parsing reads it as a compound of “hero” or “athlete,” and Hel, listed as the Germanic goddess of death (Canard 1958, 126). This reading is, perhaps, overly keen to seek out common mythological parallels for this Rus' ritual. McKeithen, working from Togan's parsing of Ibn Faḍlān's language, explores the compound in detail, suggesting either a translation of “witch”, or a Persian compound of *gavān*, a warrior, and the feminine form of *pir*, “old man” (McKeithen 1979, 141). It is widely agreed that we can read a negative impression into this terminology, but this last interpretation, drawing on a feminization of “old man”, is of interest in relation to Arabic constructions of Rus' gender roles.

It might be argued that the Angel of Death transcended gender binaries as Ibn Faḍlān understood them. Certainly, she did not seem to fit within the far more uniform picture presented by other Rus' women, free and enslaved. As I will discuss in Chapter Five, gender constructions in the 'Abbasid Caliphate carried the potential for fluidity, particularly in relation to various roles assumed by slaves. It is not a great leap of the imagination, therefore, to read a queer or otherwise fluid gender construction in this complex description of the Angel of Death.

It is useful to draw attention to common scholarly applications of Ibn Faḍlān's Angel of Death. Whilst recognising that our Rus' funeral is not directly analogous to Viking-Age funerary narratives, Price suggests that this ritual bears many of the hallmarks of those in evidence in the archaeological material in Scandinavia. He identifies parallels with a series of Scandinavian graves which have been associated with ideas about female ritual leaders: the Oseberg burial, Norway; Kaupang Ka. 294-296, Denmark; and Fyrkat Grave 4, Denmark (Price 2010). At risk of oversimplifying our readings of these three burials, we might note we have here three examples of "deviant" female burials, often associated with the idea of an Old Norse *vǫlva* (Stylegar 2007, 97). On the basis of Solli, who notes that "queer theory entails perspectives of difference and otherness," and observes that shamanistic roles typically involve blurred gender boundaries across many cultures, we might read these potential *vǫlva* burials as queer (Solli 2008, 197, 204). The grave at Kaupang has long been recognised as transgressing gender boundaries due to its arrangement, grave goods, and unusual costume; fragments of leather were found alongside the deceased's oval brooches (Stylegar 2007, 96). The Fyrkat burial similarly contains an example of a woman dressed in leather (Price 2010, 130). Our only examples of full leather costume occur in these burials, and this costume is certainly vastly divergent from norms of female appearance during the Viking Age.

To look to further instances of "deviant" burials which might be queered, the older of the two individuals in the Oseberg burial suffered from Morgagni-Stewart-Morel syndrome (Næss et al. 2008). The symptoms of women with this syndrome, also termed *hyperostosis frontalis interna* (HFI), might have included virilism, obesity, and facial hair (Flohr and Witzel 2011). This syndrome is rare in premodern osteoarchaeology (Flohr and Witzel 2011, 39). Common in old age, it might be imagined that this woman transgressed gender boundaries as we would understand them today, assuming a non-normative gender identity.

Of course, Ibn Faḍlān was unaware of these parallels. He does not describe the Angel of Death as a leather-clad ritual leader, and does not depict her as homogenous with other ritual figures, among the Rus' or elsewhere. Certainly, her gender expression appears unusual in his eyes. The unusual aspects of her character, however, do not arise from any comparative work; this interpretation is Ibn Faḍlān's own. We see this in his naming of her character, and in other foreign aspects of this ritual which so frustrate archaeologists of Viking ritual (Moen 2011, 41). Price draws parallels between the Arabic construction *Malak al-Maut* and Old Norse *valkyrja* (Price 2010, 133). This seeks to align Ibn Faḍlān's interpretation, which draws on an Islamic name for the angel who separates the soul from the body at death, with Old Nordic belief. For our purposes, however, this overt awareness of his position as an outsider making sense of an unfamiliar ritual is helpful. My focus is on this outside construction, rather than the actuality of cultural parallels with Scandinavia. From his Ifranjalist perspective, working to parse this ritual in terms recognisable to his readers and to render this unfamiliar culture knowable, Ibn Faḍlān develops an interesting character.

That is not to suggest that Ibn Faḍlān has superimposed his own labels on the Angel of Death. Later in this account, he refers to her as “the crone called the Angel of Death” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 37), seemingly deferring to Rus' culture for the correct terminology. Throughout the *Risala*, he is keen to offer up linguistic tidbits. Among the Bulghārs, demonstrating his own rudimentary language skills, he describes the unusual apples from which the female slaves took their name: “The apples, I noticed, are dark. In fact, they are extremely dark and more acidic than wine vinegar. The female slaves eat them, and they get their name from them” (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 25). In light of this, it seems unlikely that Ibn Faḍlān would develop an entirely new name for the Angel of Death; rather, he probably offered a translation of Rus' terminology.

Throughout the funeral, the Angel of Death's behaviour differs significantly from that of all other Rus' women on record. At the ritual's zenith, having urged her victim to imbibe more alcohol and forcibly steered her to her final resting place, we receive the following account of how the sacrifice is understood to have proceeded:

The crone called the Angel of Death placed a rope around her neck with the ends crossing one another and handed it to two of the men to pull on. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in between her ribs, here and there, while the two men strangled her with the rope until she died (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 37).

This violent slaughter is not representative of what we might expect from a typical female role. She takes on the most violent aspect of this slaughter. Whilst the men participating in the killing are responsible for holding the slave girl down, and strangle her at the direction of the Angel of Death, the ritual leader herself engages in bloody and repetitive activity. Ibn Faḍlān describes this stabbing as occurring at various, seemingly random points across the victim's rib cage, implying that she did not need to follow a strict routine, but simply stabbed at will. This violence would surely have been shocking from a male perpetrator; as discussed in the previous chapter, the female slave makes for a sympathetic victim. In this case, however, the stark juxtaposition between the dazed and helpless slave and the witch-like Angel of Death emphasises the sinister and atypical nature of this female character.

4.3 “Your father won his property by the sword” (Lunde and Stone 2012, 183).

Free women in the Arabic sources on the Rus' form perhaps the most nebulous gendered category in my analysis. These women are not accompanied by predetermined expectations about gender roles; unlike slaves or sacrificial victims, there are no concrete preconceptions which we might attach to free women in terms of their status or role in society. We can most easily divide these final representations of women into two separate discussions: the inheritance rights of Rus' women, and Ibn Faḍlān's decorated women.

The former category of free woman is discussed as part of a broader idea in the Arabic sources concerning the Rus' as a violent people. In this category, we see one explicit reference to the inheritance rights of women, in Marwazī's account of the Rus'. This is an extension to his almost verbatim replication of Ibn Rusta's account (Lunde and Stone 2012, 182). To look to our main reference to female inheritance, then, Marwazī writes:

They [the Rus'] are very numerous, and look to the sword to provide them with livelihood and profession. When one of their menfolk dies, leaving daughters and sons, they hand his property over to the daughters, giving the sons only a sword, for they say: 'Your father won his property by the sword; do you imitate him and follow him in this' (Lunde and Stone 2012, 182).

Ibn Rusta offers information only on the inheritance of Rus' sons (Lunde and Stone 2012, 126-7); it might be suggested, then, that Marwazī's female inheritance extension was an amendment intended to offer a logical solution for uninherited wealth. In any case, this is

significant because it establishes women as property-owners in their own right. Whereas Ibn Faḍlān's depiction of wealthy Rus' women, discussed below, is contingent on male wealth and does not acknowledge the possibility of female ownership, this interpretation is suggestive of a comprehensive and widespread framework for property ownership. Indeed, this is perhaps the most powerful representation of Rus' women across the Arabic sources, in that it affords agency and wealth to these women in their own right.

I would suggest that female inheritance rights are simply a side effect of a violent image of the Rus'. Ibn Rusta's account continues with a discussion of Rus' warfare, claiming: "They [the Rus'] never quit the battlefield without having slaughtered their enemy" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 127). What is important in these two accounts is the idea that Rus' men are cast out by their own fathers, and forced to resort to violence. This is especially significant against the backdrop of a Caliphal army whose ranks were heavily populated by foreign muscle (Golden 2004). So overwhelmingly combative an environment, in which all Rus' men could expect to win wealth by violent means, must have appeared barbaric and uncivilised. Rus' women may have inherited and owned property, but they did so only because Rus' men were so strongly inclined to violence.

Of course, it must be remembered that this ownership was conjectural, and an easy speculation to make concerning a distant culture. It is, perhaps, reminiscent of popular Arabic stereotypes of Scandinavian women as equipped with the right to request divorce,⁷ or discussions of the marital agency of Ibn Rusta's Burtās:

When a girl reaches marriageable age, she is no longer under the authority of her father and can choose any man she wants. The man comes and asks the father for her hand, and her father says yes or no according to the wishes of his daughter (Lunde and Stone 2012, 119).

In these descriptions of supposedly barbarian women of the north, we see the Ifranjalist Gaze in action. Although some of the rights apparently enjoyed by these women were not unusual or wildly distinct from those of women in the 'Abbasid Caliphate, there was clearly an appeal in presenting a female Other who possessed an extensive sense of freedom and independence,

⁷ Travellers from the Spanish Umayyad dynasty encounter this practice. At-Tartushi refers to its occurrence at Hedeby, then a Danish trade emporium: "Women take the initiative in divorce proceedings. They can separate from their husbands whenever they choose" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 163). Similarly, the Spanish poet-diplomat al-Ghazal, whose journey to *al-Majūs* has been labelled a fabrication (Pons-Sanz 2004), quotes the queen he seduced: "[N]or do we have jealousy. Our women are with our men only of their own choice. A woman stays with her husband as long as it pleases to do so, and leaves him if it no longer pleases her." (Allen 1960, 23).

either via property rights or the right to choose her partner. I would suggest that the overarching factor, for Rus' women and for the other women mentioned, is the fact that these rights situated women firmly within the public sphere.

However, Marwazī's presentation of Rus' women is inherently limited. No sooner has he described Rus' women as independent owners of property, than he reveals that Christianity has eradicated this system of warfare and female inheritance. He writes: "And in this way their education was effected, until they became Christians, during the year 300/912" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 182). Just as in the previous chapter, where I drew attention to Yāqūt's decision to specify the newfound Christianity of the Rus' only after he had revelled in the description of their pagan funerary rituals, I suspect that Marwazī's eagerness to portray the "before" and "after" images, as it were, stems from a desire to sensationalize the Rus' Other. The general trajectory of Marwazī's account develops the Rus' from violent pagans, to Christians whose "faith blunted their swords" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 182), casting them into poverty. From here, a partial conversion to Islam was undertaken, at which point Marwazī can offer praise: "Their valour and courage are well known, so that any one of them is equal to a number of any other nation" (Lunde and Stone 2012, 183).

This is telling with regard to female inheritance. In one fell swoop, Marwazī confines this practice to the pagan past, framing it alongside issues of barbaric practices. In this sense, then, we may read tacit disapproval in the practice of exclusive female inheritance. This disapproval likely stems from the staunchly gender-selective nature of inheritance, and its requirement that young Rus' men seek their own fortunes through warfare. Nevertheless, it is of note that our most powerful representation of a Rus' woman in an Arabic source is of a long-abandoned practice, far removed from the civilising influences of an Abrahamic religion.

4.4 "Depending on her husband's financial worth and social standing" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 32).

Our final reflection on Rus' women comes, once again, from Ibn Faḍlān. This representation, referring to Rus' wives, offers a typological framework for mediating their appearances:

Every woman wears a small box made of iron, silver, brass, or gold, depending on her husband's financial worth and social standing, tied at her breasts. The box has a ring to which a knife is attached, also tied at her breasts. The women wear neck rings of

gold and silver. When a man has amassed ten thousand dirhams, he has a neck ring made for his wife. When he has amassed twenty thousand dirhams, he has two neck rings made. For every subsequent ten thousand, he gives a neck ring to his wife. This means a woman can wear many neck rings. The jewelry they prize the most is the dark ceramic beads they have aboard their boats and which they trade among themselves. They purchase beads for one dirham each and string them together as necklaces for their wives (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 33).

Many valuable details are offered here. This excerpt is used as written testimony to support the archaeology: parallels are drawn with oval brooches in women's graves throughout the Viking diaspora (Jesch 1991, 120). Looking beyond this use of the Rus' account as evidence for Scandinavian practices, though, we can extract further useful information. Ibn Faḍlān reflects on trade and travel, the commissioning of goods, the preferred currency of the Rus', social status, and the possession of small tools by Rus' women. This passage is hugely informative. What, then, should we make of the fact that it is women who facilitate transmission of cultural information?

Returning to the topic of Ibn Faḍlān's gaze on Rus' women, these wealthy wives were a true spectacle and, moreover, one which was fully clothed. As established previously, he appears to have spent time looking at the Rus' slaves in their various states of undress. The free Rus' women, though, are quite literally in a class of their own. Hermes summarises the appeal of these women, who were less worryingly underdressed than other Rus' women:

For Ibn Fadlan the *faqih*, who is enjoined to lower his gaze when seeing foreign women, the exotic and erotic women proved too alluring to pass unnoticed. The temptation must have been inevitable for the pious Ibn Fadlan (Hermes 2012, 95).

The metal-adorned Rus' wives were eye-catching. We might surmise that Ibn Faḍlān liked what he saw; to have built up such a clear typology referring to every free Rus' woman, in which individual wealth can be so accurately read, he evidently devoted considerable time to reflecting on female costume. Additionally, these women were clearly very visible, both to facilitate the vast scope of these observations on female dress, and for female adornment to serve as a functional signifier of male wealth. If Rus' women were kept behind closed doors, the symbolic function of their neck-rings would become redundant.

Ibn Faḍlān's description of these women is formulaic, allowing no room for deviation. We might expect, in part, that this is an oversimplification of his observations, systematising Rus'

culture for the benefit of his readers. It conveys a clear impression that Rus' women were consistently adorned in such a manner. Ibn Faḍlān thus establishes Rus' wives as a shining source of glamour in the darkest depths of the north. His Iفرانجیست Gaze casts these women as heavily metalized walking manifestations of barbaric wealth.

Amīn Rāzī's quotations of the *Risala* offer further food for thought. Here, the material from which a woman's brooches are made is attributed to the wealth of the Rus' woman, not her husband. Of minor significance is Amīn Rāzī's extension of the list of possible materials from which these breast boxes could be made. More valuable, however, is his speculation on the reasons for this Rus' style:

The women of their land have boxes made, according to their circumstances and means, out of gold, silver, and wood. From childhood they bind these to their breasts so that their breasts will not grow larger. Each man puts a chain around his wife's neck for each thousand dinars of his wealth (Smyser 1965, 96).

Smyser is not convinced by this additional detail about the purpose of Rus' brooches; he presents it as evidence of Amīn Rāzī's likely role as a "rationalizer" (Smyser 1965, 95). That this clarification on the purpose of the brooches should be included, however, suggests that it was deemed believable. A similar account of bodily restriction, applied to women in the Sixth Clime (the Rus' included), is found in Ibn al-Faḳīh. Writing in the early tenth century, he describes women "whose custom is to cut off their breast and burn it (i.e., its place) lest it grows" (Samarrai 1959, 166). As such, it is conceivable that Arab readers believed that these extravagantly-adorned women might be actively restricting bodily growth in order to fit into a well-defined cultural image.

This takes on further significance when we recall that the Angel of Death is described as "corpulent" or "stout" (Ibn Faḍlān 2017; McKeithen 1979). By drawing comparisons between our middle-aged ritual leader and the Rus' wives in their uniformed finery, we might reach further conclusions about the Rus' wives themselves. If some of Ibn Faḍlān's readership understood Rus' women as restricting the size of their bodies, we might juxtapose this with the discussion of the Angel of Death. In close proximity to the discussion of Rus' wives, comparison was perhaps implicit.

Above all, though, in this iteration of Ibn Faḍlān's account we see that Rus' women adhere to performative gender roles. The ramifications of this modificatory behaviour, regardless of its

actual factuality, would be lasting for the women involved; it represents a long-term commitment to the Rus' cultural image. This contributes to a heavily standardised picture of Rus' women, reflecting a very faithful adherence to a culturally-defined set of aesthetic values. In this, we may reflect that Ibn Faḍlān wished to distribute a very clear cultural image on the basis of the women he observed.

5. ‘Abbasid Women

Our Arab writers understood the Rus’ as Other, and treated them accordingly in their portrayals of the far north. This did not preclude them, however, from drawing on more familiar frames of reference when constructing Rus’ gender roles; developing ideas about the Other serves chiefly to solidify ideas about oneself. The following chapter offers a brief outline of relevant ideas about gender in the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, with a particular focus on the reign of al-Muqtadir. Although some of our sources and their manuscript witnesses are later than this period, the sources themselves generally refer to the Rus’ as they were in the early tenth century. As such, my focus on al-Muqtadir’s reign centralises this overview of ‘Abbasid gender on a parallel time period. This is crucial for the dissection of Ibn Faḍlān’s views as an eyewitness observer. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a benchmark against which descriptions of Rus’ women may be considered, to enable recognition of normative ideas about gender transplanted from the Islamic world into Rus’ society, and ideas which were truly Other.

5.1 Powerful Women

Al-Muqtadir’s reign is generally identified as a critical phase in the ‘Abbasid Caliphate’s downfall (Kennedy 2016, 161-71). Made caliph at the age of thirteen in the year 295/908, his reign is considered highly disastrous. It ended when he was killed in 320/932 (Kennedy 2016, 167). Women have been presented as instrumental in the downfall of the boy-caliph, both by contemporary observers and in more recent historical assessments. Al-Tanukhi (d. 994) wrote that al-Muqtadir’s father, the Caliph al-Mu’tadid, predicted that al-Muqtadir would encounter problems due to the power women held over him (van Berkel 2007, 3). Osti suggests that his initial position as a boy-ruler, and some key instabilities early in his reign, were insurmountable issues (Osti 2013b, 56). Culturally, the period of his reign is considered a golden age (Osti 2013a, 188), and his imperial outreach work with the Bulghārs of Ibn Faḍlān’s *Risala* testifies to a potentially comprehensive diplomatic programme (Kennedy 2013, 33). The overwhelming impression we are left with, however, is one of an incompetent caliph overseeing the downfall of the Caliphate (Kennedy 2005, 64).

Al-Muqtadir’s mother was Shaghab, a Byzantine concubine who obtained extraordinary levels of power (El Cheikh 2004a, 151). The name Shaghab is a nickname meaning “trouble,” so-given because giving birth to a male son was felt to be problematic for the

caliph's other wives and concubines (van Berkel 2007, 7). Once her son became caliph, we see that Shaghab was considered troublesome for other reasons. The thirteen-year-old caliph, appointed partly due to perceptions that he could be easily influenced, was controlled by his mother (Bray 2004, 135). Shaghab herself rose to a considerable position of power within the 'Abbasid harem, owning substantial amounts of property and on more than one occasion seeing off threats to the reign of her son (El Cheikh 2004a, 153). Against the backdrop of the dwindling fortunes of the 'Abbasid empire, and for later writers processing this decline, many suggested that Shaghab's extraordinary political power was instrumental in the empire's downfall, despite her positive influences on the Caliphate (El Cheikh 2013). Royal reproduction was a means of making the institution of concubinage respectable, and through this high-status connection Shaghab was able to forge a new role for herself as mother of the caliph (El Cheikh 2015, 82).

Shaghab was not the only powerful woman in the 'Abbasid Caliphate. Umm Musa was another woman in al-Muqtadir's court who became powerful (El Cheikh 2013, 168). She held great sway over political appointments, and held such an impressive amount of power that it was considered dangerous to speak ill of her (El Cheikh 2003, 46). Her role in the Caliphate equipped her with a well-established bureaucratic office, and her power was considered so extensive that it encroached on that of the caliph and his mother (El Cheikh 2010, 335; van Berkel 2007, 9).

That Shaghab in particular enjoyed such an elevated status is significant in the context of my analysis. Looking to Ibn Faḍlān, and interpretations of the funeral ceremony as a posthumous marriage which transformed its victim from slave to wife, we can recognise an understanding of slavery as something of a fluid state. Against a socio-political backdrop in which caliphal slaves could attain considerable power, we might consider the Rus' funeral reflective of this social context. Ibn Faḍlān's slave girl becomes a central conduit for expressions of respect and love towards the deceased chieftain; the Rus' men who rape her do so with the explanation that they have acted out of love for her master (Ibn Faḍlān 2017, 36). Although certainly not of the same scale as Shaghab's political rise, it is possible that readers of the *Risala* would have accepted the victim's status change as a manifestation of the fluidity of women's social status. Here, relationships with men are crucial; it is as the wives or mothers of important men that slaves saw their fortunes change.

5.2 Slavery and Gender Fluidity

It is also worthwhile to discuss recent research into the roles of slaves within the ‘Abbasid Caliphate. In particular, we might discuss slaves as sexualised objects and the pursuant popularity of establishing gender fluid roles for slaves. This allows us to consider the sexual expectations placed on slaves in the Caliphate as a counterpoint to Ibn Faḍlān’s judgement of the highly sexualised roles and display of Rus’ slaves.

The practice of keeping slaves as concubines is well-documented. Shaghab was not the only Byzantine slave to give birth to a future caliph (El Cheikh 2015, 82). What we also see evidenced in recent research, though, is documentation of the sexual usage of male slaves. Rowson discusses the popularity of the *mukhannath* in the ‘Abbasid court; this performative male cross-gender role predates the ‘Abbasid Caliphate significantly. The rise of the ‘Abbasid dynasty, however, brought with it an increased demand for this role, alongside the emergence of male public homosexuality in the Caliphate (Rowson 2003, 57-9). A parallel role developed for female slaves which drew on a sense of gender fluidity and the wearing of male attire. The *ghulamiyât*, however, were not intended to cater to female desires, but to male ones (Rowson 2003, 51). In this way, female slaves catered to male desires concerning both pederasty and homosexuality, but did so in a manner which was somewhat more socially acceptable. The issue of the *ghulamiyât* as publicly visible women remained, but unlike *mukhannathūn*, who relinquished their manhood in the performance of this role, the *ghulamiyât*’s femininity allowed for legitimate consummation, allowing them to retain or regain normative gender roles (Rowson 2003, 54).

It is clear that there were various sexual roles assigned to slaves in the ‘Abbasid court. There is extensive evidence as to male sexual mores delineating a series of sexualised roles and expectations for slaves. It is interesting that these should encompass male and female slaves, since we see little evidence of interest in male slaves among the Rus’. When the potential for sacrifice of a favourite male servant is raised among the Rus’, Miskawayh voices no suggestion of homosexuality. It is worth noting, however, that Miskawayh similarly does not attest to female sacrifices being sexually motivated; perhaps he was reluctant to assign such a salacious detail to an already shocking ritual. Nevertheless, reading this male sacrifice against the context of the ‘Abbasid homosexuality is an intriguing prospect.

The presence of slaves in a society was not unusual, and slaves were frequently assigned sexual roles within the Caliphate. As a social principle of the time, this was not unique to the Islamic world, and so the keeping of slaves by the Rus' was unsurprising. Moreover, the Rus' were a nodal point in a slave trade reaching as far as Baghdad, so a sense of connection surely existed (Jankowiak 2017). Biddick points to the fact that the Arabic *saqlabi* (slave) is linked to the ethnonym "Slav", referring to those enslaved and traded by the Rus' (Biddick 2001, 203). As such, we might surmise that observers such as Ibn Faḍlān were not surprised by the fact that Rus' slave girls were expected to engage in sexual intercourse; their shock stemmed from the very public nature of this behaviour.

5.3 The 'Abbasid Harem

Perhaps the most important issue when offering a comparative view of women in the 'Abbasid caliphal court and women among the Rus' is visibility. The women of the 'Abbasid court remained in the harem. It is regularly emphasised that modern western understandings of the harem and what it entailed as a space have been warped by imperialist and orientalist ideations of the harem as a sexual space for the keeping of a sultan's concubines. As Lewis notes, "the harem is a space with an overburdened significance in several clashing discourses" (Lewis 2004, 179). In practice, however, the harem was a diverse and multi-faceted space whose purposes expanded far beyond male sexual gratification (Ali 2010, 22). As we have seen, figures such as Shaghab and Umm Musa wielded extensive power. They did so from within the harem, establishing extensive networks across the court (El Cheikh 2013). As such, the sense of boundary provided by the harem was easily circumvented.

Eunuchs were integral to maintaining the harem's boundaries and acted as messengers across the court (El Cheikh 2013, 178). Sometimes construed as a third gender role within understandings of classical and medieval gender (Tougher 1999, 92),⁸ this forcibly manufactured group was a popular commodity. Eunuchs were frequently imported into the Islamic world, despite the fact that it was illegal to make eunuchs of one's own slaves (El Cheikh 2013, 178). The continued popularity of eunuchs speaks to the importance of

⁸ This is difficult ground, and Ringrose suggests that across Byzantium and other areas which utilised eunuchs, the extent to which these slaves were forcibly detached from their masculinity and established as a third gender is widely variable (Ringrose 1994, 94, 108). Moral, however, suggests that we should avoid assigning judgements of a third gender to non-western cultures, on the basis that binary thinking on gender is a modern western construct and third gender models are not sufficiently comprehensive as a challenge to binaristic models (Moral 2016).

ensuring the harem was well-connected with the rest of the court, as eunuchs were well-placed to serve as intermediaries in these environments.

The harem represents a crucial difference between Rus' and 'Abbasid women. Rus' women were evidently very visible; recalling our discussion of Ibn Faḍlān's tendency to gaze on the Rus' women, we understand that his visit to the Rus' offered ample opportunity for him to exercise his Ifranjalist Gaze. Rus' women of all social standings were freely visible, and in no way secluded. As such, recognisable practices and customs, such as the keeping of slaves for sexual purposes, became unacceptable simply because these activities took place in a public environment.

That is not to say that Rus' women could have been made respectable but for their visibility. The construction of these women as Other was substantially more complex than this, relying on factors such as their ethnicity and barbaric background; most importantly, perhaps, these were pagan women. Though we do not see these women, aside from the Angel of Death, as active orchestrators of pagan rituals, their placement within a pagan society is instrumental in their Othering.

5.4 Othering Byzantine Women

As mentioned, Shaghab and other caliphal mothers were Byzantine concubines. They raise a useful opportunity to explore perceptions of a foreign Other somewhat closer to Baghdad than the Rus'; Shaghab was by no means the only Byzantine woman in Baghdad, and she came from a nation whose existence and proximity weighed heavily on the 'Abbasid Caliphate.

Whereas the Rus' were distant, little-known, and largely irrelevant to Caliphate, Byzantium featured proximately in Baghdad's cultural consciousness. The Byzantine frontier was a critical point of contact facilitating various types of cultural exchange (El Cheikh 2004b, 2). Representation of Byzantium in Arabic sources was often politically fraught, and female representation formed a focal point of criticism of Byzantium (El Cheikh 2004b, 225). In particular, Byzantine women are presented in Arabic writing as concubines. This was a striking representational tool; since Muslims could not be enslaved in the caliphate (El Cheikh 2015, 81), we only encounter foreign women as concubines. This presents a

polarising dichotomy, with the sexualised Byzantines on one side, and Islamic family structures on the other:

[E]mphasis on certain sexual tropes worked to construct Byzantium as a particular kind of location and helped solidify Islam's identity and sense of pride and belonging. Sexuality played a great role in mapping differences: the Arab Islamic "here" and the Byzantine "there" were distinguished by the imagined differences between the sexual practices of "us" and "them." [...] Islamic authors' depictions mirrored their expectations. Their assessment of Byzantine women derived not entirely from their observations, but was rather determined by the values, standards, and prejudices of Abbasid society (El Cheikh 2015, 92).

El Cheikh presents issues of gender and sexuality as key vectors in verbalising Byzantine alterity (El Cheikh 2015, 95). In this way, we can understand that women did not have to be especially visible in order to prompt self-reflection. Situated closer to the Caliphate than the Rus' were, Byzantine women were an immediate choice for this form of self-reflection because Byzantium was close enough to pose an imperial and cultural threat. We must therefore situate an understanding of Byzantine women against a backdrop of the nature of boundaries in facilitating exploration of the Other and the self:

Travel creates boundaries and distinctions, even as travellers believe that they are transcending them. In the hope of creating new horizons, travellers set off from home, encounter "others" and return with a sharpened awareness of difference and similarity (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990, 5).

The extent of Arab thought on Byzantine women brings this sharply into focus. As El Cheikh observes, "Arab interest [in Byzantine women] arose from a desire to show difference and to strengthen the idea that Arab Islam was the foremost culture of morality, propriety, and control" (El Cheikh 2015, 95). Clearly, women were a useful means of Othering a culture, and served as a touchstone for mediating a sense of how one's own culture was different and superior. This ties in closely with the importance of the family structure; El Cheikh observes that the central importance of morality and family in 'Abbasid thought meant that women who flouted the boundaries of acceptable behaviour were to be feared. In presenting dramatically rendered differences and utilising cultural stereotypes, key tenets of Islamic social organisation could be upheld as symbols of stability (El Cheikh 2015, 90; 1997, 245).

Of course, our accounts of Rus' women are generally somewhat more neutral than those of the Byzantines. While it may be noted that Ibn Faḍlān devotes considerable time to his concerns regarding Rus' sexual behaviour (El Cheikh 2015, 90), the level of concern demonstrated is less immediate than may be seen in Arab imaginings of Byzantine women. In this, we may return to Phillips' comments, in Chapter Two, regarding the proximity of unconventional female behaviour. She notes that Mongol warrior women could be discussed at length in Western European literature because their cultural and geographical distance reduced their threat level (Phillips 2011, 194). Similarly, we see many examples of foreign women in the Arabic sources, and many of these are heavily sexualised. On the basis of distance and consequent threat, however, some of these imagined women are more ominous than others. Unlike Byzantine women who could and did arrive in the Caliphate as concubines, the likelihood of Rus' women arriving *en masse* as a cultural and sexual threat was significantly lower.

6. Conclusion

Women are frequently written off as irrelevant in discussions of Arabic writing on the Rus'. This corpus of sources is regularly characterised as depicting a very masculine environment, with little or no possibility of female visibility (Jesch 1991, 118; Mägi 2018, 204). It is therefore very easy to write the appearance of women among the Rus' in a binary, along lines of freedom and slavery or life and death; in viewing their depiction as two-dimensional, discussions of these women have maintained that women were of little interest to Arab writers. Looking across the sources which deal with the Rus', however, the reality is far more complex. Chapters Three and Four demonstrate that we encounter a series of standardised archetypes, such as sacrificial victims and Ibn Faḍlān's decorated women, but also some deviations from standard patterns of gendered portrayal, as we see with the Angel of Death, those Rus' women who inherited from their fathers, and slaves who did not become sacrificial offerings.

The readers of these accounts did not need wholly accurate information, or even to like the women they encountered in these texts. Indeed, given the ways in which these women were Othered, as members of a barbaric pagan culture which enjoyed public sexual intercourse and slaughtered its women, surely the Rus' were not meant to be likeable. What was intended, however, was that these women figured visibly in Arabic accounts of the Rus'. Whilst modern scholarship has not been eager to recognise this visibility, we should acknowledge that the placement of foreign women was an active choice. In choosing to present women at all, Arab writers had an opportunity to offer a tantalising sense of what this barbaric Other, largely pre-Christian and far from the civilised Fourth Clime, and could thus build on their own sense of self. Chapter Five speaks to the appeal of using foreign women as a mechanism for engaging with one's own practices, and for defending the superiority of these practices against those of foreign cultures. The Rus' were safely distant, and less known than the Byzantines; this perhaps allowed for greater creativity in their rendering, and provided ample opportunity to fully revel in the shocking Otherness of the Rus' from a safe distance. That we see women occupying so many different roles, then, is testament to the versatility of the Rus' as a tool of cultural comparison and self-understanding for Arab writers.

This analysis of the Arabic sources on the Rus' lays the groundwork for the further development of gender studies in relation to this corpus of sources, but only scratches the surface. Having identified female Rus' archetypes, it is necessary to further explore how the

concept of the Rus' as a people was spatialized in order to accommodate these types of women, and to contextualise this against depictions of women in surrounding areas, such as the Khazars and the Bulghārs. Among the Rus', we see each type of woman as existing in distinct social arenas, and so an integrated gender studies and spatial theory approach would add additional nuance to investigations of Rus' gender in the Arabic sources.

Having identified various female archetypes, we can situate these accounts of Rus' women within their Arabic contexts. By establishing patterns, such as the frequent depiction of women as sacrificial victims, we can understand the key appeals of Rus' women, and the key ways in which foreign stereotypes might be constructed and utilised. In categorising these women according to the role they played in various Arabic sources, we can see the nuances of Arab depictions of the other; that multiple different archetypes could be drawn on suggests that the Rus' comprised a diverse cultural source material. As a result, we may gain an insight into the complexity of Arab constructions of the Other. These constructions were by necessity multi-faceted, both to present convincing ideas about the Rus' and to better centralise understandings of the 'Abbasid Caliphate itself.

7. Bibliography

7.1 Abbreviations

EI2 *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960-2005)

EI3 *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 3rd edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2007-)

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Adam of Bremen. 1959. *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. Translated by Francis J. Tschan. New York: Columbia University Press.

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