


IBN FADLAN AND A BY-PASSED REMARK ON AN IMAGINARY GEOGRAPHICAL *TOPOS*: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DECREASING FACTUAL CREDIBILITY REGARDING THE CAUCASUS AREA OF THE SILK ROAD

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DOSSIÊ
Histórias conectadas da Idade Média

ABSTRACT

This article looks at some aspects of Ibn Fadlan's journey to the steppe during the 10th Century to ostensibly establish friendly relations between the Abbasid Caliphate and the Volga Bulgars. He left a detailed account of his trip, which includes remarks on the mythical people of Gog and Magog, traditionally considered the eschatological enemies of the civilized world. Ibn Fadlan was somewhat incongruent regarding his portraits and opinions of the Slavic or Turkic people he found in the steppe. The main contribution of this article relates to Gog/Magog and modern conceptions of the "Silk Roads", especially concerning their extension in the North paths and their permanence in the *longue durée*. In this respect, some modern theses regarding these issues must be tackled, most remarkably, that of Peter Frankopan and Barry Cunliffe. Other Arabic travels to the North are also examined in order to discuss cultural continuities and breaks between the steppe and the Mediterranean world. The main objective of this article is to show that Ibn Fadlan, in spite of his alleged accuracy, also shared, even if *en passant*, some of the literary *topoi* of his time and subsequent historians and geographers added to the mythical apocalyptic theme nearly forgotten currently, namely the boundaries of civilized world and Gog/Magog. This article concludes that Ibn Fadlan was probably the first Arabic historian to believe and thrive on the study of these people, whereas his successors overstated information about them, from the 13th Century on.

KEYWORDS

Silk Road. Islamic geographers. Religious syncretism in the Middle Ages.

When working with ethnographical material, it is often the content that catches the attention of scholars. This article is no exception, looking mostly at Asia Minor, Parthia, Sassanid Persia and the likes, and having as the standard reference the works of Herodotus, Ctesias and Strabo, just to quote a few. The study of Ibn Fadlan¹ can go further and has interesting peculiarities when observing legendary regions and people. What the modern military call “humint”² was applied by Ibn Fadlan on his accounts of a number of people and regions on the so-called Silk Roads (FOLTZ, 1999). However, a closer study of Ibn Fadlan indicates his peculiarities when compared to other “typical” Arabic geographers-ethnographers. Perhaps surprisingly, the successors of Ibn Fadlan were often more imaginative and less focused on concrete evidence. This can be proved by observing that most of what Ibn Fadlan saw and described in what is, in fact, an *abregé* of a larger work (“Meshed manuscript” – Msh. ms. –, for it was found in the city of Meshed in 1923),³ first edited by Togan (KAFADAR; KARATEKE, 2011, p. 574), is factually correct in the whole and parts of his descriptions and remains accurate to this day. But it was a simple sentence at the end of that *abregé*, when concluding his remarks on the Khazars, which was odd even for the life and times of Ibn Fadlan. His report can be seen as part of a long tradition that began somewhere in Babylon, during the Jewish Exile and went on to our times.⁴

The essential novelty for most readers of Ibn Fadlan is what he has to say on the first Russians and, more importantly, on the Khazars. However, his report includes the wonderful and fantastic people supposedly locked up by Alexander the Great in the limits of the Earth.

¹ His full name was Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān ibn al-‘Abbās ibn Rāšid ibn Ḥammād, with Arabic variations on longer and shorter vowels, plus different types of consonants, which western languages do not have. For practical purpose, these traces will be omitted in this text; the reader will have no difficulty finding more information on his name and spelling. The edition on which this article is based is that of Richard Frye (2005), whose full reference can be found in the bibliography together with an excellent Brazilian translation that has an important peculiarity: before the Meshed ms., Ibn Fadlan was known, second-hand wise by another Arab author who quoted him extensively: Yāqūt Albulḍān, who wrote an encyclopedia called *Mu‘jam Albulḍān* around 1229CE. While travelling, he found in Merv a ms. of Ibn Fadlan’s text, which he used extensively but did not quote in full. It should be noted that other Arabic travelers/writers knew Ibn Fadlan’s work as well, namely Ibn Hayyān Alqurtūbī, Al-Masudi (examined in this article) and the Persian Ibn Ḥurdāqbih. Cf. the edition Ahmad Ibn Fadlan translation and comment by Pedro M. Criado (2018).

² Short for “human intelligence”, in the sense of information acquired by persons by comparison to drones, satellites, aircraft, etc.

³ This ms., in turn, had two editions, both with adventurous stories which came out in 1939. One from Zeki-Vedi Togan, a former Communist who tried to establish a Soviet republic in Bashkir, but was arrested by the Soviets and escaped afterwards. His edition was based on his PhD, obtained in Bonn, between 1931-1935 or, according to other sources, between 1935-1937 in Gottingen, between 1937-1939. Later, in 1953, Togan became a professor of Turkic history in Istanbul. The other edition was published almost simultaneously, in Russian, by Andrei P. Kovaleskii, who disappeared during the mass executions in 1939 but was later found alive. This edition is of special interest since it has photos of the Meshed manuscript.

⁴ The Islamic calendar starts with the Hijira, the journey of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. For practical purpose, the non-Islamic Gregorian standard calendar will be used throughout this article.

THE FOES FROM THE NORTH

The last paragraph of what we call the “Meshed manuscript” reads:

The Khazars and their king are all Jews. The Saqaliba,⁵ and all those neighboring them, give obedience to the [Khazar] king. He speaks to them as slaves, and they show him fealty. Some believe that Gog and Magog⁶ are Khazars (FRYE, 2005, p. 77; MISHIN, 1998, p. 242).

Ibn Fadlan flourished, according to information available, between 921-922 CE, when he was sent by the then Caliph of Baghdad to establish strong diplomatic ties with the Bulgars, who lived near the Khazars and south of the fledgling Rus (COOK, 1923, p. 53-61; LUNDE, SCHMIDT, 2012, p. 134). On this mission, he was in charge of explaining the Islamic law “accurately” to the Bulgars and build a fortress for their king, who needed one badly mission which was not accomplished. Ibn Fadlan was a shrewd informant when reporting about the people he met, their habits and characteristics of interest, the rivers he crossed, the temperature he found along the way. That is what he states about himself at the beginning of the text:

This is [the book of Ahmad ibn Fadlan...] in which he recounts what he saw in the land[s] of the Turks, the Khazars, the Rus, the Saqaliba, the Bashkirs⁷ and others, of the many types of their religion of the histories of their kings, and [of] they act in many affairs of their life (FRYE, 2005, p. 25; GOLDEN, 2011, p. 314).

So far, nothing special – although the piece of information provided by Ibn Fadlan is of great interest to anyone studying Inner Asia during Medieval times (BAHIY, 2006). However, having such a keen eye for all ethnological things – such as customs, marriage customs, currencies, to quote a few – why would Ibn Fadlan end his report with a legendary warning that goes back to the Hebrew Bible, more precisely to Ezekiel 38-39?

In that passage – where the people mentioned by Ibn Fadlan, are possibly the Khazars – begins a very *longue durée* mental tradition, one that became ubiquitous in Judaism, Christianity and Islam – and which would have a great career among non-monotheistic people as well: the legend of Gog and Magog. This is one of the pillar themes of the so-called *Alexander Romance* (AR), a literary fantasy concoction that spread throughout the Eurasian continent, from Iceland to Indonesia, being adapted to the needs, customs and, more importantly, to the religion of each place. Thus, the Macedonian conqueror was “adapted” to the religious needs of several people (ZUWIYYA, 2011; STONEMAN; ERICKSON; NETTON, 2012, p. ix-xiv).

⁵ The phonetic markings of the term Arabic *Şaqāliba*, referring to Slavs and Central Asian people in general will not be used in this article.

⁶ Arabic, transliterated, “Yajuj” and “Majuj”. There are variants for both the names and transliteration, but these are irrelevant for the purposes of this article. “Gog” and “Magog” will be used throughout the text.

⁷ Ironically, the same people of Togan, the first editor of Ibn Fadlan’s remaining text.

The people of Gog and Magog, in Ezekiel, are essentially formidable foes – although not yet in apocalyptic guise – which, just like so many other disasters, struck Mediterranean people coming from the North (YAMAUCHI, 1982, p. 49-107):⁸

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. Prophecy against him and say: Thus says the Lord God: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; I will turn you around and put hooks into your jaws, and I will lead you out with all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed in full armor, a great company, all of them with shield and buckler, wielding swords. Persia, Ethiopia and Put are with them, all of them with buckler and helmet; Gomer and all its troops; Beth-togarmah from the remotest parts of the north with all its troops — many people are with you. Be ready and keep ready, [...] Therefore, mortal, prophecy, and say to Gog: Thus says the Lord God: On that day when my people Israel are living securely, you will rouse yourself and come from your place out of the remotest parts of the north, you and many people with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army; you will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the earth.

And in the same tone, Ezekiel continues:

In the latter days I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I display my holiness before their eyes. [...] On that day, when Gog comes against the land of Israel, says the Lord God, my wrath shall be aroused. [...] I will summon the sword against Gog in all my mountains, says the Lord God; the swords of all will be against their comrades. [...] And you, mortal, prophecy against Gog,⁹ and say: Thus says the Lord God: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal! I will turn you around and drive you forward, and bring you up from the remotest parts of the north, and lead you against the mountains of Israel. I will strike your bow from your left hand, and will make your arrows drop out of your right hand. You shall fall on the mountains of Israel, you and all your troops and the peoples that are with you; I will give you to birds of prey of every kind and to the wild animals to be devoured. You shall fall in the open field; for I have spoken, says the Lord God. I will send fire on Magog and on those who live securely in the coastlands; and they shall know that I am the Lord. [...] On that day I will give to Gog a place for burial in Israel, the Valley of the Travelers¹⁰ east of the sea; it shall block the path

⁸ All Bible references taken from the New Revised Standard Version compared to the Hebrew or Greek when necessary.

⁹ Hebrew *hanaba* [imperative masc. sing, i.e. Niphal] *al-gog*; “[go] prophesy to Gog”; Greek *kai sú* [you] *uie anthropou* [son of man] *prophéteuson* [prophesize] *etí* [upon] *Gog*. In any case, a difficult task for the prophet Ezekiel, only understandable in the semi-apocalyptic flavor of his book.

¹⁰ Hebrew *qever*, “grave”, “place of burial”; Greek *mnemeíon*, “grave [of the remembered]”.

of the travelers, for there Gog and all his horde will be buried; it shall be called the Valley of Hamon-gog.

The passage in Ezekiel furnishes the essentials of the characteristics of Gog, that comes from Magog (or at least the basics; other authors will augment them considerably, as we shall see). We have here one and only one people, “Magog”, meaning simply the place where they come from. They appear in many other passages in the Hebrew Bible and also in the New Testament, but quoting and analyzing these would take us too far unnecessarily since it is Ez 38-39 that provides the matrix for subsequent derivations of the theme.¹¹

The foes of the Chosen People come from the North. Most likely this means, metaphorically, but with an eye to geographical and political events in the past, from Scythia, Cimmeria and other steppe lands. Although, even with archaeological and traveler’s evidence this is not an obvious point to prove – but is likely enough to develop the “end of times” theme, the wrath of God and redemption of Israel. A host of Western travelers in medieval times would develop the “identification” of Gog and Magog, as well as measures to contain them: Christian of Stavelot, William of Rubruck, Riccolodo da Monti di Croce, Vincent de Beauvais and even Marco Polo, who may have taken the Great Wall of China for the “wall” to contain Gog and Magog (MARSHALL, 1998, p. 6-12, 120-122, 144; GOW, 1995; JACKSON, 1990; KLEĆZAR, 2012, p. 339-346; BAUER, 1995, p. 1-44). In a clever version, by a Western traveler, even an etymology for “Mongol” is made out of “Gog” + “Magog” = “Mogoglis” (BOYLE, 1979, p.126). We will return to this theme in the conclusion.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT, FROM ZERO TO HERO

The Ezekiel passage is a quasi-apocalyptic passage, which was probably written during the same period in which the Jews came into close contact with the Persians and may have borrowed the ideas that would later become what we now call “apocalyptic literature”. During the Exile, if there were any kind of systematic apocalyptic thinking, it was restricted to the Persians themselves: unless Zoroastrianism should be regarded as a 3rd Century CE invention, as some propose, based on very weak arguments. By the time of Ezekiel, it was recurrent in many tales of the sacred scriptures of the Zoroastrians, i.e. the Avesta.¹² However, it is only at a much later phase of development of those themes that “substantiated” tales about such eschatological foes begin to appear. Therefore it happens with the dramatic case of Alexander the Great who went from the “accursed” destroyer of the *dēn* (i.e. the correct religion, Zoroastrianism – this is repeated repeatedly in a very important Zoroastrian apocalypse, the *Zand-ī Wahman Yasn*) to a model-king (CZEGLÉDY, 1966, p.17-18), of Persian origin indeed. It also

¹¹ Even in the Dead Sea Scrolls the derivations are already present: “Magog” in 1QapGen ar, cols.XII, XVII, 1QM col.XI, 4Q161:21 and 4Q523 (twice, in fr. 1 and 2); in Josephus (twice): Jewish Antiquities 1.122-123 and Jewish War 7.254. Pseudepigraphical literature, like Jubilees and the Sibylline Oracles, also mention them. In the New Testament, they play a very important role in Revelation 19:11-21:8.

¹² The extant earliest mss. date from the 13th Century, but several scholars believe that they preserve much older traditions, going back to oral poetry not so different from Homer, and also from the Late Bronze Age (i.e. the end of the Second Millennium BCE).

happens in the Persian national epic, the *Shahnameh*,¹³ and in the Persian versions of the AR (STONEMAN; ERICKSON; NETTON, 2012 p. 3-18; DAVIS, 2004, p. 514). In those versions, or Persian texts that are known to us only through Arabic or Farsi references, but were composed and transmitted in Middle Persian, many common lore themes appear, most remarkably, the search of the “Water of Eternal Life” by Alexander (SZALC, 2012, p. 327-336).¹⁴

Hitherto, there is a gradual transformation of Alexander, but not the crossing of his path with Gog and Magog yet. Even the names of those people are not clear: they appear as “Gog from Magog” in Ez 38-39, which is called by specialists on the matter “GO” or Gog Oracles (TOOMAN, 2011, p. 2; 38-84; DONZEL; SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 16-56; DITOMMASO, 2005, p. 25; 119). The scholarly investigation on such early usages of “Gog” and “Magog” do not concern us here. However, we are concerned with subsequent uses of “Gog from Magog”, “Gog and Magog” (two different people, by far the most common form of the myth) and also “GogMagog”. In all cases, they represent a hopeless case of cruelty and, in Second Temple Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even in other faiths, the announcers of the end of time, remain. Actually, even currently, they are popular (HOSEIN, 2009).

This begins to change into different shapes and different times in the Arabic–Farsi cultural *milieu*. Both Ferdowsi and Tarsusi share an interest in Gog and Magog and, even before them, Alexander plays an important role in the Qu’ran. Ibn Fadlan also reports on these two mythical people, as mentioned. The main question this article proposes derives, in fact, from Ibn Fadlan’s last words in what was left to us, the *Msh.ms*. In this work, Gog and Magog, in a complete reversal of roles, are equated not to the foes of the Jews, but as the Jews – i.e. the Jews from Khazaria (GOW, 1995).

THE ROLES OF GOG AND MAGOG IN ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

To be fair to Ibn Fadlan, as an investigator of universal proportions, and not a foolish copyist of “outdated ideas” (considering the differences between Medieval mental framework and ours), he had Islamic predecessors, not only Jews and Christians. Qudāma (approx. 883-948) was one of them: he combines the figure of *Dhū al-Qarnayn*,¹⁵ well-known by the prophet himself (*Qur’an*, *Sura* 18:83-98 [*Al-Kahf*, “The Cave”]; LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 104) with *Iskandar* (i.e. Alexander).

How and when this series of confusions took place is unclear – but the Prophet already called Alexander “a friend of his friends” (ABEL, 1951, p. 15; ZUWIYYA, 2011b, p. 74-75). Therefore, Qudāma was probably just repeating a literary *topos*. But he does far more than that: Qudāma ascertains that Alexander was contemporary with the Chinese T’ang (618-907). This is puzzling: if this is not a blunder (and there is no reason

¹³ Mostly related to “Iskandar”, but also understood as Azdahak, a Zoroastrian demon. Ferdowsi refers to the event in a section translated as “Sekandar Constructs a Wall to Defeat Yajuj and Majuj”. They have faces like animals, the usual barbarity and, Ferdowsi admits, “we cannot resist them” – hence the need to build a wall.

¹⁴ Which deserved a *ghazal* by none other than Hafez (*Ghazal* 37).

¹⁵ Arabic lit. “the one with two horns”. The origin of this term is unclear and might reflect images of Alexander in coinage.

to believe it was), Qudāma places Alexander's exploits (i.e. from the AR) dangerously close to his lifetime – at best, 265 years before him, at worst, as his contemporary for 41 years. Considering this, Alexander could have known the Prophet (d. 632 EC) for 14 years. As for the rest of the story, Qudāma is not particularly fanciful, but provides many details inspired by the AR: Alexander defeated Porus, king of India and then put Tibet and China under tribute. When meeting the king of Tibet, a long, anachronistic discourse follows (FRYE, 2005, p. 104), when Alexander meets the *tarkhāns* of the Tibetan king (which is impossible, since *tarkhān* defines a Turkic tribe differently from that of Tibet). Regarding China, Alexander gives one-tenth of the tribute received (as he did with Tibet) to his “wife Roxana, daughter of Darius” (STONEMAN, 1991, p. 2-4; STONEMAN; ERICKSON; NETTON, 2012, p. xiv; DONZEL; SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 58; MÜLLER, 2012, p. 296-307).

An interesting note regarding not just a usual “universal political history” of sorts is that the tribute paid to Alexander reflects precisely the manufactured goods that were commercialized in the Eastern route followed by Ibn Fadlan. Here, the story takes a twist that probably influenced all the subsequent ethnographical narratives in Islamic historiography up to, at least, the 13th Century. Qudāma's narrative of Alexander's action in China will be summarized in the next paragraph. If the journey to the Khazars (implying the north section of several Silk Roads) had not happened, the subject of Gog and Magog would not have received the attention it did by Fadlan.

FACTUAL CONTRADICTIONS: THE UNIVERSAL EXTENT OF THE SILK ROADS AND THE “NEED” TO FORTIFY CERTAIN AREAS

The original term for Silk Roads, *Seidenstraßen*, was coined in the plural by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, in 1877, in his monumental work on China. The historian of the third millennium faced a series of theoretical issues that derive from the multiple roads, in and out of the Far East, long before Marco Polo. At least, one modern historian argues that the Silk Roads extended up to Alaska, long before America was founded on the other side of the world by Columbus (FRANKOPAN, 2016, 2018). This goes further in the words of Cunliffe (2015, p. 11, 245), who says that “Silk Roads” is just a fancy term to depict a very long duration process that involved the whole of Eurasia. Even being a daunting task, imagining the interconnection of an immense shared common, interconnected heritage throughout Eurasia is entirely possible (CUNLIFFE, 2015, p. vii, 10, 203-293; GORDON, 2008).

This continuity is confirmed by the conformity of institutions, objects and religions to similar patterns throughout Eurasia and Africa: the historian is free to look for continuities or for differences. What is at the same time “global” and relegated to the realm of fantasy are the myths discussed in this article regarding Gog and Magog as found, imagined or reported by Islamic travelers. This mythical complex, coherent in the self-contained discourse of its own absurdities, is also the expression of universal themes. The confines of the Earth, the identity of Gog and Magog, even their names – these are very important issues of the narratives that are examined here. The crossover, in the Book of Ezekiel reappears in the AR and in a host of other texts, apocalyptic or



not¹⁶ are a substantial issue on Islamic historiography (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 104). All this constitutes an intricate web, worth examining.

The continuity felt when reading Ibn Fadlan is that of a sort of continuity regarding Eurasia. This is not the same as declaring that he understood Eurasia as part of the same civilization (as historians and archaeologists in modern times do, taking both written and material evidence into account), but rather that one can sense in his text the fluidity of language when dealing with quite varied regions, climates and people. In this sense, the report that Ibn Fadlan left is quite different from what was called “universal history” in Antiquity and Byzantine authors: he is less worried with magnificent events *per se* and more interested in the amount of details he can amass regarding the regions he visited first-hand. What remains puzzling to the modern reader is that Ibn Fadlan has no difficulty in including mythical reports and people in his text. Qudāma does this as well, and this trend continued in Arabic historiography until a rather late date. In any case, Ibn Fadlan is writing on what he conceives as a global context – and it is our own way of classifying true from false reports that makes his report look exotic at times. But, even then, given the ration between his fantastic people and the “global” or “universal” conquests told in the AR – his intelligence gathering data is precise (when dealing with actual people and places) and, mostly, coherent in what he considered a global scale.

Qudāma ends his narrative in a grandiose manner with a common theme: Alexander stays in China in order to build a city called the “Stone Tower” (*Bur al-Hijāra*). This tower was garrisoned by 5,000 Persians under the command of a general unheard of, but who beared a Greek name – Neoclides (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 106). Alexander goes on to lock up the Turks – who play Gog and Magog – in a clever fashion: they are conveniently located in the Northwest of China and inaccessible by the so-called “Green Sea” (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 106). There is, however, a defile that can be closed to spare the world of their ravages; Alexander does that (as he will do in a number of subsequent stories) and comes back, founding cities along the way – most, if not all, real cities, but built from East to West: Samarkand, Dabūsiya, Alexandria the Farther (Alexandria Eschate?), Bukhara, Merv, Herat and Zarānj. He also founded Rayy, Isfāhān, and Hamadhān; then he went peacefully to Babylon, to end his life after several years of honest and fair kingship (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 107; STONEMAN; ERICKSON; NETTON, 2012; p. ix, 10, 16, 22).¹⁷

It is also remarkable that, besides being worried about the end of times and the nature of Gog and Magog, the Arabic/Farsi writers we are discussing are not covered in anonymity or pseudonymity.¹⁸ Ibn Fadlan was a public servant in the inner circle of the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir. His precursor, Qudāma, wrote his account as part of an administrative book: “The Book of Land Tax and the Art of the Secretary” (*Kitāb al-kharāj wa sinā’at al kitāba*) (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 104); and so were others in this series. Ibn Hawkal (fl. 943-969 CE) also has interesting observations on Gog and Magog (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 189-193; HERMES, 2012).

¹⁶ The text of the Ps.-Methodius is perhaps the best case in point. Cf. LORENZO, 2005, p. 203-205, 224.

¹⁷ The narrative is unashamedly inaccurate from a historiographical point of view, but, perhaps, retains some of the Greek pride and homage paid to those who erect cities as cultural heroes.

¹⁸ It happens in the AR, wrongly – and early – attributed to Callisthenes, or the Apocalypse of the Ps.-Methodius, who could not have been the alleged authors in any of the cases.

FROM SUPERFICIAL MENTION TO A COMPLETELY MEANINGLESS TALE: SALLĀM THE INTERPRETER CHECKS OUT THE CALIPH'S DREAM

Ibn Kurradādhbih (fl. around 844), even before Qudāma, was also an administrative man, apparently responsible for the postal service (*barīd*) and, perhaps shocking to our eyes, responsible also for espionage and intelligence systems of the Abbassids.¹⁹ Ibn Kurradādhbih's narrative is the longest – and the reader will forgive me for shortening some passages, I hope.²⁰ As a polymath, he also wrote on music, literature and geography. Besides that, he was perhaps the first descriptive geographer in Arabic (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 108; DONZEL; SCHMIDT, 2009 p. 131-161). The passage we are about to read is declaredly from another person, who told it all to him. This traveler was called (if he existed at all) Sallām, the Interpreter; he earned his nickname for knowing more than thirty languages, according to Ashnās (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 109).²¹ The tale begins when Caliph Wāthiq²² had a nightmare which perfected the theme of the barrier to avoid Gog and Magog (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 108). This had been, accordingly, erected by Dhū al-Qarnayn, that is, Alexander the Great. In the nightmare, the barrier had been breached, and the Caliph looked for someone capable of going to the limit of the world, where the barrier stood: his assistant Ashnās (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 110) insisted that only Sallām, the Interpreter, was fit to conduct such a mission (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 108). Sallām was equipped with 50 strong men (of whom, only 14 would return alive), money, mules and letters.

In an interesting detail that suggests that the author already knew Ibn Fadlan's report on the cold North, the Caliph ordered jackets made of felt covered with leather, with matching fur-lined boots (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 108). Their route was also similar to that of Ibn Fadlan, avoiding the Caucasus and going round the Caspian Sea to reach Tiflis, with a letter to the emir of Armenia, Ishāq ibn-Isma'il²³ (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 108). The emir, in turn, handed them letters concerning the kings of the Alans and of the Khazars. Therefore, they went and passed through black earth, which smelt bad. From here on, the absurdities in this story grow exponentially – they may as well be in all the stories we are analyzing.

After much traveling, they spent 20 days traversing towns devastated by “the people of Gog and Magog” (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 109). Then, they reached the barrier, in which one chain only held the pass. The people in the area were Muslims, spoke Arabic and Persian, knew the Qu'ran, and had mosques and even a “commander of the Faithful”, eager for news from Iraq, i.e. from the Caliphate (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 109; BRAUER, 1995, p.6). They moved then to a region with movable iron gates (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 109; ANDERSON, 1932), work of Alexander, naturally. From there, they moved on to a range of mountains, with a complex of fortifications that kept

¹⁹ This position may have put himself in contact with much lore from lands He never knew personally. Ibn Kurradādhbih may also have been less critical of the stories brought to him, but then this accusation could hold true to all the authors examined here – even shrewd servants as Ibn Fadlan and al-Biruni.

²⁰ Those interested in the full text will find it in the bibliography.

²¹ A Turk in command of the Abbasid army.

²² This must be Caliph al-Wāthiq Bi'llāh, an Abbasid who reigned from 842-847 CE.

²³ This must be the one called Sahak in near Georgia. He ruled from approx. 833-853.



Gog and Magog inside; which the inhabitants called “The Barrier of Gog Magog [sic]” (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 109; ANDERSON, 1932). The bricks of these forts were made of iron sheathed in brass, and the responsibility of guarding these gates was hereditary “like the Caliphate”, the narrator hastens to add (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 111). The supreme commander of the compound checks everything three times a day: in the morning, at mid-day and in the afternoon.

A system of hammers, whose sound is heard from one fort to the next, allows the guardians to know that all is well and that the barbarous Gog Magog are kept inside the gates. Up to this point, no matter how wondrous these complexes may seem, the plot turns into meaninglessness. Sallām asked if there had been any breaches or even attempts against the gates (for he spent 20 days just witnessing the havoc brought about by Gog and Magog). The answer is a candid “no, never” (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 111). Sallām finds a crack, but it is very small; the guards are asked again about Gog and Magog and say that they came close once, but were thrown back by a strong wind (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 112). Sallām cracked a bit of dust from the metallic bricks to take back home to the Caliph as proof that he had, in fact, been at the gates; they receive an escort up to Khurāsān and head back home (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 112). The way back is quite long, via Samarkand and Bukhara, and Wāthiq, the Caliph, lavishly receives the remnants of the expedition (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 113). Sallām shows him the metallic dust as proof of the successful mission (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 112).

This is just a summary of the events given to Ibn Khurradādhbih by Sallām; the complete account was given later to the Caliph privately. Anyway, this is a story that definitely makes no sense. If Gog and Magog (or “GogMagog”) devastated cities covering an area equivalent to 20 days of travel, they obviously found a way through the barrier. Sallām does not seem impressed when he reaches the “Iron Gates”, but nor does he conduct a full inquiry about what happened. In fact, he does not even mention the devastation to the commander and their staff. The inspection shows a small breach; it makes no difference to the plot. The barbarians GogMagog did once try to come closer to the barrier, but a wind threw them back; the guardians of the gates tell no more and Sallām asks no more either, just collects that bit of dust (which also suggests that Wāthiq knew beforehand the material of which the gates and walls were made of).

Therefore, there is a sequence of failures that the narrator celebrates as triumphs: the devastation is ignored, or at least not mentioned, there is no hint on how Gog and Magog came out, and, we can conclude, that Wāthiq’s dream does not make sense either. An educated guess – but too far away from the narrative – could leave to the imagination that Wathiq saw the destruction; Sallām did not recount the whole devastation to the Caliph, at his own risk, but told Ibn Khurradādhbih. In any case, there is only one logical conclusion: Gog and Magog escaped and destroyed and rampaged at will. Therefore, ends the most absurd of all the Arabic-Persian narratives concerning Gog and Magog: clueless and with an unconceivable happy conclusion.

MORE “HUMAN INTEL” ON GOG AND MAGOG

Mas’ūdī, one of the greatest travelers during the Middle Ages, who died in 957 CE, after having settled in peace in Egypt and written on what he had seen in a kind



of universal history,²⁴ by no means not the first, poetically dubbed “The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Gems” (*Muruj al dhahab wa ma’adin al Jawhar*) (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 140). Mas’ūdī barely needs an introduction, given the scope of his work. In this part the theme of the RA, Gog and Magog, takes another twist.

In the story, supposedly told by Sallām, the Interpreter, it is possible to vaguely locate Gog and Magog to the North and then to the West of the Caliphate, in modern-day Iraq. Mas’ūdī toes the same line, placing them in the mountain range of the Caucasus. For him, these mountains were so impressive that he chose a “perfect” number to describe them – 72, that is 6 times 12 (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 140). “Only the Creator can number the people who live there [...]”, says Mas’ūdī (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 141).

Here, the plot of the AR takes another turn: we have a city controlling the wall to isolate Gog and Magog, but it was the work of another king – Khusraw Anōšīrwan – who had built a city called Darband, probably in Afghanistan, and a wall that went into the sea, (whether the Black or the Caspian remains unknown). Again, the iron gates appear, every 3 miles. Mas’ūdī adds a detail that gives some credibility, which other narratives lack: the barrier is not against the mythical Gog and Magog, but against the Khazars, the Alans, various Turkish people (which is odd, since it would be expected that they came, at this time, via the Iranian plateau), the Avars and other unnamed “infidel tribes” (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 140).

Thus, when all the pieces seem to fit, Mas’ūdī embroils the narrative again (AL-AZMEH; 1992): after thanking God for the protection given, he begins a long whining, saying that Islam is now in decline and Pilgrimage [to Mecca] in “peril” (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 141). Given his knowledge of a much bigger picture of history, he compares the Sunni disputing groups to what he calls “party kings” who emerged after Alexander the Great (i.e. the Diadochi). Mas’ūdī goes on with his complaint and ignores the Parthian period: it was with Ardašīr-i Papāgān (the semi-legendary founder of the Sassanid dynasty) that political unity was re-established (LUNDE; STONE, 2012, p. 141-142). Mas’ūdī says that this unity lasted until the times of the Prophet, and began to crumble under al-Muttaqi (blinded in 968 CE, ending a Caliphate that had succumbed to Turkish forces). Of great importance in the otherwise shrewd report of Mas’ūdī is that the location of the foes of Islam is approximately that of Ibn Khurrādadhbih, although he does not talk about Gog and Magog.

WHEN PSEUDEPIGRAPHIC AUTHORS MEET

The two last travelers-geographers to be examined in our tour on those eerie lands (that do not always make sense, even in their own terms, like the story of Sallām) are Biruni and Qazwīnī.

Al-Biruni,²⁵ the nickname for Abu Rayhan Mohammad Ibn Ahmad, began his life as the son of a respected scholar who, nonetheless, lived some distance away from the nearest facilities (like a mill, etc.; KAMIAR, 2009, p. 1). He can be compared to Mas’ūdī in terms of relevance and attention to detail, regarding the way he worked with his sources. However, at his time, the political and social forces around the Islamic

²⁴ The genre was popular among Arabic writers and well known in Antiquity.

²⁵ Persian *birun*, *biruni*: he Who lives “outside”, or “comes from the outside”.

world had taken a very sharp turn. Biruni was born in 973 and died around 1050. His intellectual production is immense and covers so many fields that it would be useless to discuss it here. Suffice it to say that Biruni knew around 10 languages, all the common usage at the time, like Arabic, Persian, Greek and Syriac (KAMIAR, 2009, p. 10; 84; 94; 139; 141) and his interests covered many branches of knowledge. At this time, it is not just the Biblical Gog and Magog, for all the changes they have been through, that faces us.

One of the most important medieval apocalypses, derived from a Christian source, possibly earlier than Islam, is the “Apocalypse of Ps.-Methodius” (from now on Ps.-Meth. DITOMMASO, 2005, p. 95, ALEXANDER, 1968, p. 998-1000). It refers, as any other pseudepigraphic text, to the authority of a real character both in the Syriac version,²⁶ and to Methodius of Patara in the Greek mss.²⁷ To sum up, a problem that would yield more than one book, and adding the Gog / Magog issue in Biruni we have now a “tri-partite” problem

Biruni mentions the “unclean people” behind the “Alexander Wall”.²⁸ His references to these people are very odd, as presented in this article. They interrupt the crescendo in exaggerations since Ibn Fadlan and precede the most unbelievable tales of all in Qazwini, as a pause in music. This is in accordance with the Ps.-Meth. (DONZEL; SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 115; GARSTAD, 2012), but also with the “Russian Primary Chronicle” (RPC), also known as “The Tale of Bygone Years”. The third revision of the text, made by Prince Mstislav, in Strataia, in 1116 CE, also quotes Gog and Magog covering events from approx. 850 to 1110 CE (CROSS; SHERBOWITZ-WETZOR, 1953, p. 180-185). Biruni’s narrative, which is perhaps the most sensible and discreet of all (even by comparison to Ibn Fadlan) parallel to an unlikely couplet, Ps.-Methodius, and the RPC:

²⁶ Methodius of Olympus, d. around 311 as a martyr who left interesting doctrinal texts on the virginity of Christ, among other themes. Cf. PATTERSON, 1997.

²⁷ Patara also died as a martyr just about the same time, in 312. Cf. BOYLE, 1979, p. 128.

²⁸ Compare this to the more moderate terms by Mas’ūdī, above. However, most of Biruni’s complaints are directed to the Hindu caste system.

Table 1 – Compared Gog and Magog excerpt in Biruni, Ps.-Meth. and RPC

AUTHOR / TRACES INDEXED	Biruni	Ps.Meth.	RPC
Origin	*Yūrā, a strange people from the North similar to the reports of Ibn Fadlan and others	*The sons of Japheth	*Lughra or Yughra, who live in the North with the Samoyedes
Habits	*The people of Yūrā exchange their products by placing them on the ground in a certain area and then going away, like shy, wild things ¹	*Are accursed, false, and foul *Make use of (ineffectual Godless sorcery)	*Eat gnats, flies, cats, and serpents *Do not bury the dead; eat them *Also eat aborted babies
Kind of wall / Builder	*God	*Alexander, who was afraid that they would spread	*Alexander of Macedon
Location	*The extreme North, where movement is possible on dog sleds or skates made of bone	*The land of dawn and beyond	*The desert of Yathrib in the Northeast
Kind of lock	-	*Brazen gates covered with asyncite, fire-proof	*Gates of brass, but they can only communicate through a small breach in the range of mountains
Will come out	*From the desert of Yathrib, at the end of the world	*At the end of the world (North, nor East nor West)	*At the end of the world, all the eight tribes expelled [not just the four mentioned] will come out, at God's command
Peculiarities	*Language unintelligible *By a breach, if given iron objects, give furs in return	*There are 22 nations kept within these gates; one of them has dog-heads (Cynochepalans)	*Consist of four races: Torkmens [sic], Pechenegs, Torks [sic] and Polovcians (four of the impure sons of Ishmael)

Sources: Biruni (LUNDE; SCHMIDT, 2012); Ps.Meth. (GARSTAD, 2012, p. 25-26), RPC (CROSS; SHERBOWITZ-WETZOR, 1953, p. 184-185).

²⁹ The keen eye of Biruni reports, shortly after, that “the same thing is done by people from the land of Sri Lanka when they barter cloves”, in a kind of mirror-like attitude between extreme North and extreme South.

THE REPORT OF QAZWĪNĪ: THE NEXT-TO-LAST FANTASTIC REPORT ON THE EXTREME NORTH

Strange as it may seem, al-Qazwīnī (again, a man of letters and no pseudonym for a semi-legendary author) is the one author who takes the global limits imposed by the once-Biblical people of Gog and Magog to the illogical limits human mind can reach. Writing around 1275, he specialized in mirabilia;³⁰ in a book aptly named “The Wonders of Creation”. Gog and Magog (i.e. Yājūj and Mājūj) are two Turkish tribes descended from Yāfīth (Biblical Japheth, again referring to one of the sons of Noah) who dwell on the “Seventh Clime” (SCHEGLOV, 2006, p. 352).

Qazwīnī quotes another author, al-Shu’bi, who said that, when Alexander came to the land of Gog and Magog, huge crowds encircled him asking for help against the two tribes,³¹ which “destroyed everything, like vermin” and even ate vermin, multiplying astonishingly: none of them died before fathering 1,000 children. That may well be so, however, 1,000 children per man is, by comparison, little when the historian pauses to weigh how many believed in such otherworldly geography. As incredible as it may seem, each of those authors believed that each adult man from these mythical people were able to bequeath thousands of men.

CONCLUSION

One of the most celebrated historians of our own time, Marc Bloch, had quite an intense experience during the First World War. He reported that he was astonished at the comeback of orality as the main form of communication, and, with it, perhaps, the abandonment of all modern logic, credibility and science (BLOCH, 2019, p. 10-25). Given the place he was in the whole front, the wholesale butchery on both sides surely abhorred him. However, in the trenches, observing his own soldiers with the keen eye of a historian, telling ear-to-ear lies in the age of aviation, chemical warfare, electricity, grand-scale press, he was left with a permanent mark in his memory. “Naturally”, one is tempted to say that, from each ear onwards, the fact told first became more and more distorted.

This is the difficult conclusion of this paper, and it will probably inspire the author (or others) to go on investigating what I have come to – and what I have concluded cannot be understood as the solution; rather, it is what needs to be explained. Why do our reports tend to present Gog and Magog as historical data near the borders of the Silk Roads? Recalling that Ibn Fadlan, by comparison, had his feet on the ground and, at least, two of his predecessors used “Gog and Magog” plus “Alexander Gates” more intensely.

³⁰ So far, there is nothing surprising: although the genre, currently named “paradoxography”, but not so clearly defined in ancient or medieval times. Let us remember the best preserved of such authors among the cultured Greek, Phlegon of Tralles – personal secretary to Hadrian, the Roman Emperor, had a following – and, accordingly, a closely defined group of authors – that would surprise us. In any case, following the trend and argument of this article, Qazwini writes around 400 years after than the immediate antecessors of Ibn Fadlan.

³¹ Although six were identified: Yājūj, Mājūj, Tāwīl, Mansak, Tāris, and Kamādā; there were others, whose names were unknown.



Truly, it is a dramatic end to what we have – an epitome of a much bigger work. Any reasoning on percentages is not suitable (“if we had more, he would have used more of Gog, Magog and the likes as an explaining device”, or, the opposite, “if we had the whole work, we could see, following the general tendency of the ‘epitome’, that Gog, Magog, and the likes were very little used”). The historian that studies ancient (classical or Oriental) historiography is usually at odds with his material. With Arabic or Persian historiography, is not different; it is methodologically unwise to deduct amounts of use of this or that explanatory scheme based on fragments. Fragments should be treated for what they are – fragments. It is unreasonable to think that we can have a full picture with a “copy” and “paste” in any processor. These are not pieces of a puzzle; each is a piece of its own puzzle.

Having said that, even if the walls, gates, towers that appear in the legends referred before or elsewhere were factually true, we do not have one single coherent picture of what the Arabic travelers “saw” and described as the abominable people of the end of the Earth, who shall come at the End of Times. Although, Ibn Fadlan stands (judging by his ‘epitome’, again) as one of the most rational and reliable Arabic traveler. Instead, after Ibn Fadlan up to Qazwīnī, we have a “progression” in the volume of reports on those people (again, with the proviso that sometimes we have only second-hand references from one historian to the next – the equivalent of Bloch’s barbarian trenches). They become more sensational, they blend in more with the economy, giving furs in exchange for iron, as in Biruni and the RPC, the last texts examined. Alexander himself, having once served as the Christian king model, was later the Muslim king model. In one specific case, it may be worth looking at the ms. again to see if the writer really meant what he wrote. Reference should be especially made to Qudāma, who places Alexander as something between his own times and the times of the Prophet. Is this correct in the ms.? Or rather, did Qudāma understand the T’ang in a different fashion than we do?

In any case, from the 800’s to the Mongol invasions, what is displayed about Ibn Fadlan in this paper (and showed briefly in other Arab historians-geographers in the same vein) is a crescendo of absurdities (yes, they have their place in cultural history with its own merits, but that was not the purpose of this paper). Therefore, one can only be as amazed as Marc Bloch was and ask the simple question – “how come hearsay can take the place of precise information in a world where the latter has become more widespread? And what is the role of eye-witness accounts, so refined since Herodotus?” The theme of this paper certainly deserves closer and further investigation. It seems that the more universal or global the successors of Ibn Fadlan try to be, the bigger the need to fill in “historical gaps” with what is, after all, global-scale hearsay – Gog, Magog and the ways to restrain them.

As Bloch said, reflecting on his war experiences, “history can only cast a little light on these questions” (BLOCH, 2019, p. 47-50). How astonished would Bloch be with this material, enmeshed as it is in Biblical traditions, several apocalyptic literature overlays and travel accounts, considering that he worked with concrete and verifiable data, be it related to hearsay in trench warfare, field division in rural medieval France or the miraculous touch of kings to heal specific diseases?

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FUNDING

Not applicable.

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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PUBLISHER

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Graduate Program in History. UFSC Journal Portal.
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EDITORS

Alex Degan
Fábio Augusto Morales
Flávia Florentino Varella (Editor-in-Chief)

HISTORY

Received on: Aug. 03 2019
Approved on: Dec. 19 2019

How to cite: DOBRORUKA, Vicente. Ibn Fadlan and a By-Passed Remark on an Imaginary Geographical Topos: Some Observations on the Decreasing Factual Credibility Regarding the Caucasus Area of the Silk Road. *Esboços*, Florianópolis, v. 27, n. 44, p. 38-58, jan./abr. 2020.

