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Al-Masᶜūdī on the Slavs in Khazaria – a (not Quite) Forgotten Slavic Funerary Custom Through the Eyes of a Muslim Historian

Abstract

Al-Masʿūdī, a 10th century Arab traveller and writer spoke of a pagan custom present among the Slavs and the Rūs living in the Khazar capital, Ātil. Namely the posthumous marriage of an unmarried man. Another Arab author, Ibn Faḍlān, witnessed and described in detail a burial ceremony of a Rūs chieftain, which had many elements of a wedding ritual. The two testimonies can be easily associated together. The practice of posthumously marrying an unmarried person has been present in Slavic culture for centuries. Even now some of its aspects can still be observed among Slavs, including Poles, although their true significance has long been forgotten.

Keywords

Al-Masᶜūdī, Ibn Faḍlān, funerary custom, Khazar, Slavs.

Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī (c. 896–956) was one of the most interesting scholars of the Middle Ages. He was born in Baghdad at the end of the 9th century, during the reign of Caliph al-Muʿtaḍid bi-llāh. Coming from an intellectual background, well read and educated, al-Masʿūdī, thanks to his wide-ranging interests, perfected his education during the course of his continual journeys.

Little is known about al-Masʿūdī's early years. In fact, most of what is known of him comes from his own works. According to his account, he set out on his first voyage as a young, twenty-year old man[1]. Numerous notes in al-Masʿūdī's extant works indicate that he travelled far and wide almost until his death.

[1] He speaks of visiting India in 303 A.H./915 A.D., Barbier de Meynard, C., Pavet de Courteille, A., *Maçoudi. Les prairies d'or*, vol. I, Paris 1861, p. 254.

Al-Mas‘udi’s journeys, which occupied most of his life, took him to most of the Persian provinces, Armenia, Georgia and other regions of the Caspian Sea, as well as to Arabia, Syria and Egypt. He travelled to the Indus Valley, and other parts of India and he was more than once in East Africa. His extensive voyages took him, as some believe, even to China[2].

Nothing is known about the purpose of his voyages or how he supported himself during those years. It is possible that, like many Muslim travellers of his time, he may have been involved in trade.

Whatever the motive for his travels, thanks to his vast interests, al-Mas‘ūdī gathered an impressive amount of information on the countries he had visited as well as on their neighbouring lands.

On his return to al-Baṣra in 943 al-Mas‘ūdī started to write his *opus magnum* entitled *Kitāb Aḫbār az-Zamān* (“Historical Annals”). This 30-volume book is lost now as is its shorter version, *Kitāb al-Awsat* (“Intermediate History”). In the same year al-Mas‘ūdī wrote yet another abbreviation of his work entitled *Kitāb Murūǧ aḏ-ḏahab wa-ma'ādin al-ǧawāhir* (“Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Stones”). It seems to have been completed then, but al-Mas‘ūdī apparently revised it twice – in 947 and 956. Then, in the same year, the year of his death, al-Mas‘ūdī composed his last work, *Kitāb at-Tanbīh wa-l-išrāf* which provides a summary of his earlier works.

Al-Mas‘ūdī died in al-Fusṭāṭ in Egypt in 956 or 957.

Of his two preserved works, namely *Kitāb Murūǧ aḏ-ḏahab wa-ma'ādin al-ǧawāhir* and *Kitāb at-Tanbīh wa-l-išrāf* (“Book of Instruction and Admonition”), the former is more significant.

It combines two of al-Mas‘ūdī’s great interests: history and geography. The geographical sections contain information referring not only to physical geography but also to anthropogeography, ethnography, natural science and other fields of knowledge. They are based on the author’s personal observations and contacts made while travelling. Where there were gaps in his personal experience, he based himself on accounts – both oral and written – derived from sources he considered reliable. He not only made use of source material of all kinds but took the trouble of verifying them wherever possible, which makes him a more than usually dependable author.

Although al-Mas‘ūdī was a traveller who spent the greater part of his life in voyages, he never visited any of the Slavonic lands. Most of his information concerning Slavs was gathered from other Muslim travellers and merchants whom he met in the course of his travels. He seems to have also collected details from the Slavonic slaves present in large number in the Islamic countries at the time.

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[2] Lunde and Stone, however, assume that al-Mas‘ūdī received much information on China from Abū Zayd as-Sīrāfī whom he met on the coast of the Persian Gulf, see Paul Lunde, Caroline Stone (eds), *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids*, London – New York 1989, p. 11.

Al-Masʿūdī speaks of the Slavs several times in his "Golden Meadows". In most cases these are brief, although not irrelevant, comments. Occasionally, however, he devotes longer passages and, in two cases, entire chapters to the Slavs.

Such is the case of a well-known passage on Slavs ("Ḏikr aṣ-Ṣaqāliba")[3] and another, on Slavonic sanctuaries ("Ḏikr al-Buyūt al-Muʿaẓẓama ʿinda aṣ-Ṣaqāliba")[4]. Also chapter 17 on Caucasus[5] contains some important details on Slavs, whom he clearly distinguishes from other East European nations such as the Russians.

The readers' attention is drawn however, to a less-known paragraph where al-Masʿūdī records some religious practices and customs performed by the multi-ethnic inhabitants of the Khazarian capital of Itil (or Ātil)[6].

Itil/Ātil, situated at the Volga estuary, was the capital of the Khazars since the year 750 until 969, when the Kievan Rus' ruler Sviatoslav I of Kiev conquered it and destroyed the Khazar state.

But in the first half of the 10th century, in the time of al-Masʿūdī, Itil/Ātil was still a thriving administrative and trading centre of the Khazar kingdom inhabited mostly by Jews and Muslims but some Christians and pagans lived there too. Among the pagans there were Ruthenians (ar-Rūs) and Slavs (aṣ-Ṣaqāliba) who, according to al-Masʿūdī, enjoyed equal and fair treatment as well as the freedom to profess their religious beliefs.

As far as we are able to establish, the traveller did not visit Ātil himself. The closest he got to the Khazar capital was probably the region south of the Caspian Sea. We know of at least one journey, sometime in the 930s, that brought al-Masʿūdī nearer to the Caspian Sea area[7]. This is where he might have heard about strange funerary practices.

This is what al-Masʿūdī tells us:

> "Ātil, where the Khazar king resides nowadays consists of three parts divided by a huge river (…). The said capital is situated on both banks (…). The inhabitants of this capital are Muslims, Christians, Jews and pagans (…). The pagans in his kingdom are of various races and among them are the Ṣaqāliba (Slavs) and the Rūs who live on one side of this town (Ātil). They burn their dead together with their horses (…), their implements and ornaments. When a man dies, his wife is burnt alive with him, but if the woman dies, the husband is not burnt. If someone dies unmarried, he is married posthumously and women ardently wish to be burnt (thinking) that their souls will enter paradise jointly with the souls of the (deceased) men."[8]

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[3] *Maçoudi. Les prairies d'or*, vol. III, Paris 1864, pp. 61–65.
[4] *Ibidem*, vol. IV, pp. 58–60.
[5] *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 1–78.
[6] *Ibidem*, p. 9.
[7] P. Lunde, C. Stone (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[8] Translation by Vladimir Minorski, *A History of Sharvan and Darband*, Cambridge 1958, p. 146.

And further on:

> "The usage of the Khazar capital is that there should be seven judges, two, of them for the Muslims, two for the Khazars giving judgement with accordance with the Torah, two for the Christians giving judgement in accordance with the Gospel, and one for the Ṣaqāliba, the Rūs and other pagans giving judgement according to the pagan (custom), i.e. according to the commands of Reason. And when a case of major importance is brought up before them and they do not know how to settle is, they meet with the Muslim qāḍīs and submit to their decision and follow the ruling of the šarīʿa (shariʿat)."[9]

One aspect of these funerary customs demands our attention in particular. Al-Masʿūdī mentions, that if a bachelor among the Slavs or the Ruthenians dies, he is married after his death.

This is a unique piece of information and no other author of that time – Muslim or European – speaks of such a custom in connection with Slavs. There is however another testimony, an eye witness testimony this time, that may shed some light upon al-Masʿūdī's enigmatic statement.

In the year 922, Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, a Muslim traveller and diplomat sent by caliph al-Muqtadir to the king of Volga Bulgars, observed complex funeral rites practised among the Rūs traders present in the city.

Ar-Rūs in early mediaeval Arab literature were Scandinavian warriors and merchants who settled down on the south shores of the Baltic Sea, colonized north-eastern Europe and consequently played a significant role in the founding of the Russian state[10]. In the times of al-Masʿūdī and Ibn Faḍlān, that is in the first half of the 10th century, they were already in the process of slavization, although they preserved some of their Scandinavian ways[11]. A couple of their customs though seemed to be definitely Slavic rather than Scandinavian: such was the posthumous marriage of bachelors.

Those customs, described at length by Ibn Faḍlān, very much resemble a marriage ceremony and thus may prove the truth of al-Masʿūdī's words.

Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān recounts[12] that when a Rūs chieftain died while staying in the Bulġar capital on the Volga river, he had undergone a complex burial ritual before being finally cremated on his boat, which was a Norse custom practiced among the seafaring Norsemen.

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[9] *Ibidem*, p. 147.

[10] This issue is thoroughly analyzed by Henryk Paszkiewicz, *Początki Rusi*, Kraków 1996, pp. 121–147.

[11] Tadeusz Lewicki, *Źródła arabskie do dziejów Słowiańszczyzny*, vol. I, Wrocław–Kraków 1956, pp. 126–128; Anna Kmietowicz, Franciszek Kmietowicz, Tadeusz Lewicki, *Źródła arabskie do dziejów Słowiańszczyzny*, T. III, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź 1985, p. 202–203.

[12] A. Kmietowicz, F. Kmietowicz, T. Lewicki, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–75 and 111–113.

As he was a bachelor, apart from various grave offerings like his weapons and sacrificed animals, he was also given a slave girl who was to play the role of his wife in the afterlife.

It should be stressed here, that the girl agreed to share her master's fate of her own free will. What is more, she was eager to die, since she believed, it was the only way for her to enter the paradise.

From the moment the slave girl volunteered to follow her master, her status visibly changed. She was given two servants who guarded and accompanied her and even washed her feet - something done only by servants of noble persons.

Now, as far as she was concerned, all the funeral preparations started to resemble those preceding a marriage ceremony. While the companions of the deceased were making arrangements for the ship burial, which was to take place in ten days, each day the girl drank wine, laughed and sang:

> *The slave girl meanwhile drank all day long and sang joyfully and enjoyed herself in view of the future* – says Ibn Fadlan[13].

Her behaviour can only be understood if we assume that it imitates the conduct of a bride-to-be in the period preceding the actual wedding.

Then, as the proper ceremony began, the girl was led to the boat where her dead master was already seated, dressed in his best clothes and surrounded by grave offerings, so that he could join the afterlife with the same social standing that he had had in life.

There the girl had sexual intercourse with her master's six companions in a strictly defined way. Their role corresponded to the role of groomsmen, whose rights to the bride were once quite significant. In Serbia and Montenegro, for instance, as well as in the Red Ruthenia, Great Russia and other parts of Slavic territories, it was the best man, not the groom, who was obliged to spend the wedding night (and, sometimes, the three subsequent nights) with the bride. Some of the relics present in Polish folk traditions suggest that this custom was also practiced in Poland[14].

Later, after the slave girl had been killed by an old woman known as "the angel of death", her body was arranged next to her master's body.

> *Then six men went into the tent, and all had intercourse with the girl. Then they placed her beside her dead lord*[15].

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[13] *Ibidem*, p. 71 and 111.

[14] Ludwik Stomma, Rytuał pokładzin w Polsce — analiza strukturalna, *Etnografia Polska*, 19, p. 55.

[15] Kmietowicz A., Kmietowicz F., Lewicki T., *op. cit.*, p. 74 and 113.

This in turn could have symbolized *beilager*, sexual intercourse of the spouses in the presence of witnesses, which was an important part (even a centrepiece) of marriage rituals up till the 19th and even 20th century. The further to the East, the longer we can observe this wedding rite[16].

Finally the boat, the dead chieftain, the girl and all the offerings were burnt and afterwards a round barrow was built over the ashes and in the centre of it the Rūs erected a post of birch wood, where they carved the names of the dead chieftain and his king.

> *In fact, an hour had not passed, when a boat, wood, maiden, and lord had turned to ashes and dust of ashes*[17].

The custom of a "posthumous wedding", named by al-Masʿūdī and described in detail, although not named, by Ibn Faḍlān, was known in many cultures. It was fully established across Slavic lands – among Serbs, Croats and Bulgarians in the south, Czechs, Moravians and Poles in the West, Belarussians and Ukrainians in the East. It was also present among the Germans, especially those close to the German-Slav border[18]. The similar patterns of this custom place it in the deepest layers of ritual practice.

This widespread custom was based on the common belief that an individual could not fully join the community of his ancestors just as he was not able to become part of the social community in his earthly life. So, when a young bachelor or a girl died, a complete transfer to the world beyond could not take place without carrying out a wedding ritual.

Some wedding rites of prematurely deceased unmarried persons, which may be considered as a reduced form of a once complex ceremony, survived until recently although they seem to have lost their original meaning. They can be divided into several groups.

The most common practices included burying the deceased in wedding clothes[19]. A man would be dressed in a dark suit, or any other costume considered as ceremonial, with a bouquet of flowers pinned to his chest. Girls were dressed in white with all accessories of a bride: especially a veil over the face and a garland of myrtle, rosemary and rue, plants traditionally associated with a wedding, on her head[20].

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[16] L. Stomma, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

[17] Kmietowicz A., Kmietowicz F., Lewicki T., *op. cit.*, p. 75 and 113.

[18] Adam Fischer, *Zwyczaje pogrzebowe ludu polskiego*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Lwów 1921, p. 300.

[19] A. Fischer, *op. cit.*, loc. cit.; Oskar Kolberg, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 26. *Mazowsze*, p. 3I, p. 94; Danica Dokić, The rite of a posthumous wedding on the territory of the South Slavs, *Codes of Slavic Cultures*, 3, 1998 *The Wedding*, retrieved from https://www.rastko.rs/projekti/kodovi/kodovi_eng.html#wedding 28.09.2017.

[20] A. Fischer, *op. cit*., loc.cit.

Another funerary custom that referred to a marriage ritual was a wax ring, that was put on the ring finger of the deceased[21]. It was made of wax from a church candle and was meant to symbolize a wedding ring.

Yet another element was a funeral procession that had all the characteristics of a wedding procession. In some regions the funeral lamentations included motifs typical of wedding songs. Also the presence of *drużyna* – a group of unmarried companions of bride and groom – was necessary. The coffin of a girl was surrounded or carried by her young male friends dressed in formal outfits of the kind they would wear as groomsmen while attending a real wedding. In case of a young bachelor's funeral, it was the girls who escorted the body and accompanied the deceased on his final journey. They wore clothes appropriate for bridesmaids. Both the "bridesmaids" and the "groomsmen" had periwinkle wedding bouquets – a symbol of undying love – attached to their clothes[22]. They also carried wreaths of green twigs or flowers (fir branches in winter), a symbol of innocence, to be later put on the coffin lid or on the grave. In some parts of Slavonic lands[23], the members of *drużyna* carried a "wedding tree", or a "wedding branch" decorated with ribbons, flowers and fruit – another widespread wedding custom. These would also be later put on the grave. In other regions, for example Serbia[24] a fruit tree was planted on the grave of deceased. It also had a symbolic meaning connected with a marriage ritual[25].

Another custom commonly met across the Slavdom was the presence of a substitute "widower" or "widow" at the funeral. These symbolic spouses did not have to be actual fiancées of the deceased. In some cases they were chosen from among their closest friends. In others – they were just any unmarried companions of similar age. Their role during and after the funeral was clear: they were expected to walk at the head of the funeral cortege carrying the wedding wreath. They were also supposed to remain in mourning for an appropriate period of time and were considered a widow/widower and an in-law to the family of the deceased[26].

As for the wake held after the funeral, in some parts of the Slavdom it resembled a wedding reception – with lively music, dancing, traditional *korovai*

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[21] *Ibidem*, p. 298; Svitlana Kukharenko, Traditional Ukrainian Folk Beliefs about Death and the Afterlife, *Folklorica*, 16, 2011, pp. 71–72, retrieved from https://journals.ku.edu/folklorica/article/view/4209/3966 28.09.2017.

[22] A. Fischer, *op. cit.*, loc. cit.

[23] Huculszczyzna/Hutsulshchyna for instance, see A. Fischer, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

[24] Statement on an Internet discussion board, *Folk Superstitions in Slavic countries – Slavorum*, 20.04.2012, retrieved from http://www.slavorum.org/forum/discussion/1981/folk-superstitions-in-slavic-countries 17.05.2017.

[25] A. Fischer, *op. cit.*, p. 298; M.R. Barjaktarović, Zaślubiny pośmiertne albo zastępcze (wprowadzenie porównawczo-historyczne do objaśnienia obyczaju), *Lud*, 58, 1974, pp. 87–98.

[26] A. Fischer, *op. cit.*, 298, 300; S. Kukharenko, *op. cit.*, loc. cit.

– bread that had great symbolic meaning and was part of the Slavic wedding tradition. Honey flavoured vodka was served to the mourners, and little gifts were distributed among the guests, just as they would have been given to the wedding guests during the original wedding ceremony[27]. Among the eastern Slavs the *korovai* was shared by the relatives at the cemetery, and so were the symbolic gifts[28]. All in all various elements of the marriage ritual included in the posthumous wedding rite were performed to make up for the wedding which could not be performed regularly because of the premature death.

This once comprehensive ritual survived in a vestigial form, although some groups of Slavs preserved its components more accurately then others.

As for Poland, the majority of these elements of the posthumous wedding could still be observed in folk tradition in the 19th century[29]. By the first quarter of the 20th century though, they have mostly vanished. Only a few of them are mentioned by Fischer as still being widely practised in Poland[30]. Fischer emphasizes in particular the custom of laying wreaths and carrying the coffin by representatives of the opposite sex. Traces of funeral customs associated with a wedding can also be found in folk songs, such as a song from the Lublin region in Poland quoted by Fischer: "*Zeby mi Pan Bóg dał, bym w wianku umarła, chłopcyby mnie nieśli, kapelaby grała*". ("Should the Lord permit, I would die in my wreath (= die a virgin), boys would carry me, a band would play")[31].

Today, almost a hundred years after publication of Fischer's monograph on *The Funeral Customs of the Polish People* one would have expected even those residual traces of centuries' old beliefs and rituals to have sunk into oblivion.

However, one can still witness some funerary traditions that cannot be explained otherwise than by referring to past beliefs and practices.

One of them is a custom sometimes to be seen in Podhale, the region of Poland known for its conservatism in following traditional customs. When a young, single man or woman dies, their funerals share some characteristics with a wedding celebration. The most spectacular is the appearance of the funeral cortege: companions of both sexes form a *drużyna* – a group of young people dressed as if for a wedding who stand on both sides of the catafalque during the funeral service and then follow the casket on its way to the cemetery[32].

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[27] A. Fischer, *op. cit*., loc. cit.; S. Kukharenko, *op. cit*., loc. cit.

[28] D. Dokić, *op. cit*., loc. cit.

[29] O. Kolberg, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 26. *Mazowsze*, cz. 3, p. 94; vol. 35. *Przemyskie*, pp. 51–52.

[30] A. Fischer, *op. cit*., p. 300.

[31] *Ibidem*, p. 297. According to the old-Slavic tradition, wreaths were an important symbol connected to numerous rites and festivals – it was a representation of blooming youth, purity and virginity. Only young girls and the unmarried women were allowed to wear them.

[32] As was the case in Nowe Bystre, Podhale region, in 2016, during the funeral of a 19 year old musician. See: Zbigniew Sikora, Ostatnie pożegnanie Karola Stopki, *Tygodnik Podhalański*, 4.12.2016, retrieved from http://24tp.pl/n/36060, 11.09.2017.

There is also another funeral tradition which has been observed in the territories of Lesser Poland and Silesia, but is also quite likely to be present in other parts of the country. Several young girls in wedding dresses would form a cortege to escort the body of prematurely deceased young man – such a picture was captured by reporters at least twice: in 2011 and 2012 in Poland[33]. This custom seems to be of quite a recent origin, but its roots should be found in pagan times, when, as mentioned, unmarried people underwent a ceremony of substitute wedding, so that they would be able to participate fully in afterlife.

To conclude, we can safely assume that some of the elements which associate present day funeral rites with a wedding ceremony are rooted deep in the past. The ritual in its full form attracted the attention of one mediaeval Arab traveller and its presence was confirmed by another. The rich symbolism of the funeral/wedding ceremony disappeared in the course of time. However, its remaining elements are obvious enough to convince us, that a pan-Slavic belief in the role of marriage in afterlife was so strong, that its traces survived up to this day.

Source: http://www.gazetakrakowska.pl/artykul/650497,pogrzeb-ofiar-wypadku-w-zedermanie-zdjecia,id,t.html

[33] Katarzyna Ponikowska, Pogrzeb ofiar wypadku w Zedermanie, *Gazeta Krakowska*, 4.09.2012, retrieved from http://www.gazetakrakowska.pl/artykul/650497,pogrzeb-ofiar-wypadku-w-zedermanie-zdjecia,id,t.html on 6.04 2017; Gość, *Może któraś z was wie?*, 16.12.2011, retrieved from on 19.09.2017.

An unidentified location in Lesser Poland, 2011

Source: http://www.dobramama.pl/pokaz/248010/Moze_ktoras_z_was_wie/1/new

Nowe Bystre, Podhale region, 2016

Source: http://24tp.pl/n/36060