

---

# TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

A. S. Matveev

## ARABIC SOURCES ON RUSSES AND SLAVS: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

Oriental sources provide some of the most important evidence when it comes to the early period of Slavonic and Scandinavian history. The information they contain does not, however, lie on the surface: it is hidden under a thick cover of "cultural layers", through which it is not so easy to penetrate. Even if we put aside the complicated composition of these sources, problems connected with the origin, transition and dating of information, which could be solved by the traditional methods of textual analysis, these sources still possess much of what is determined by the cultural and literary tradition and by the general characteristics of their authors' mentality. Problems of this kind usually do not attract special attention of scholars, partly because they appear too evident, partly because of a lack of interest to such questions. However, if we ignore the specific features of Arabic literary works and of the tradition they follow, we shall never be able to comprehend adequately the information they contain.

The inadequacy of our understanding of the Muslim evidence on Eastern Europe is aggravated when scholars have to use out-of-date translations of the sources and commentaries made in the late 19th—early 20th century [1]. Besides, there are still traces of the positivist attitude to interpretation of the texts, when all textual information is accepted as some sort of "reality" only to be "explained" and "identified" with something which is already known. (This tendency is especially evident when some place-names are mentioned in the texts.)

Most often the evidence presented by the sources has little to do with "reality". It is more like some subjective "virtual reality" which develops according to its own laws, where facts filtered through the medieval consciousness of the author become amalgamated with the standard patterns inherent in the Muslim culture. It is possible to distinguish, conventionally, several levels of such interaction.

1. First of all, the author, and later his audience, are affected by established stereotypes of perceiving events and phenomena. Particularly, it concerns the perception of "alien" and "foreign", which is never taken "as it is" but always interacts with the already existing cultural stereotypes. In this way any new information received by the

culture is transformed — sometimes beyond recognition — according to the rules of already existing patterns.

Thus, for example, "Russes" (al-Rūs), *i. e.* Normans, who appeared in the Muslim West, in Spain, became known under the name of "al-Majūs", *i. e.* "Magi", "fire-worshippers". The use of this term, due to its obvious irrelevancy, gave rise to many scholarly controversies. Actually, the Russes were pagans at the time when they first appeared, and in the system of concepts established among the Spanish Muslims all pagans were associated, first of all, with the Persian "Magi", Zoroastrians [2]. When a new unknown people, non-Christian and non-Judaic, so, consequently, pagan (nothing else could have been imagined), came into view, one of the inherent cultural models was put into action, which associated Russes with fire-worshippers. The very fact that they cremated their perished comrades served to confirm this identification. The standard ideas existing in the Arab culture about "Magi" were applied to the real Russes, and the practice of cremation was taken for some element of the Zoroastrian cult. As a result, the stories about Russes practicing fire-worship as their principle — even their only — religion came into being. Later, other "pseudo-information" from the traditional stock of ideas about Zoroastrians was added: for example, that Russes used to marry their sisters and mothers. It is obvious that there is no use to look for the background of these stories in actual Scandinavian history — their origin is connected not with real facts, but only with stereotypes existing within the environment where the work in question was created. However, even these stories may contain some real information, namely, that "al-Majūs" were cremating their dead. Even if we knew nothing about this custom from other sources, this evidence of the Muslim authors still could be believed (or, at least, accepted as possible), because there is nothing like this in the accounts of the real Zoroastrians. Thus, the existing stereotype makes the authors, on the one hand, supplement new evidence with facts from the established tradition, and, on the other hand, adjust the reality to the existing pattern, "seeing" what did not actually take place at all (in this case — the fire-worshipping of the Russes).