

GEOGRAPHY OF STATE FORMATION: EARLY RUS IN MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC GEOGRAPHY

*Irina Konovalova**

Keywords: Early Rus, politogenesis, historical geography, boundaries, medieval Islamic geographers
Cuvinte cheie: vechea Rus, formarea structurilor politico-teritoriale, geografie istorică, frontiere, geografi islamici medievali.

Different kinds of delimitation - territorial, ethnic, cultural, political, socio-economic, ideological - are an integral part of the process of politogenesis. Therefore, the investigation of state formation in general, and in Eastern Europe, in particular, should be accompanied by a study of issues related to the existence of various kinds of boundaries in this space, their hierarchy, and dynamic changes.

We have a number of systematic descriptions of Eastern Europe written in the 9th - the middle of the 10th century by Islamic authors. These descriptions, containing valuable contemporary data on the different stages of state formation in this region, were made on the basis of different principles of classification. Islamic writers developed ancient and biblical traditions of describing the oecumene by parts of the World and by ethno genealogies; they also used the idea of the latitude zones (the so called "climates", arab. *iqlīm*) and also widely practiced the description of different peoples according to their religious and political features. In this regard, the evolution of ideas of medieval Islamic authors on the *Rus'* people better than other medieval sources, reflects the complication of spatial relations in Eastern Europe in the 9th-10th centuries and describes the emergence in this area of a new political formation - the Early Rus state.

The most important from the point of view of the Early Rus' history are the following reports of Islamic authors. First of all it is a description of the trade routes of the Rus (*al-Rūs*) and the Slav (*al-ṣaqālība*) merchants by

* Institute for World History, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscova, e-mail: irina_konovalova@mail.ru.

Ibn Khurradadhbih (the 9th century) and Ibn al-Fakih (the beginning of the 10th century), inscribed by these authors in a global context - in the picture of Eurasian transcontinental routes that stretched out from Spain and France in the West to China in the East and of Baghdad and Ray in the South to the “outlying regions of the Slavs” in the North¹. In the second place, it is a description of the “island of the Rus”, which is incorporated into the story of Ibn Rusta (the beginning of the 10th century) on the Northern peoples - the Pechenegs, the Khazars, the Burtas, the Bulgarians, the Hungarians, the Slavs, the Rus’, the Alans and the state of *Sarīr* in the mountainous regions of Daghestan². Thirdly, it is a report about three “groups” of the Rus, which is part of the broad ethno-geographical panorama of Eastern Europe in the writings of al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawkal (both - the middle of the 10th century)³.

All three reports are well known, but as a rule they are analyzed separately, in isolation from each other, and if they are compared they are usually correlated not with each other but with other sources, primarily archaeological and numismatic. Meanwhile, it makes sense to consider the reports of Ibn Khurradadhbih, Ibn Rusta and al-Istakhri/Ibn Hawkal together, because in total they represent different stages of socio-political and integration processes in the Early Rus space and enable imagine the process of folding the territory of the Rus state.

Interpretation of the report of Ibn Khurradadhbih is commonly done in the context of numismatic reconstruction of the trade route from the Baltic Sea to Baghdad, and accordingly all explanations are focused on the very route of the Rus merchants to the Near East and to Byzantium. But where do the Rus come from, this question usually stays out of sight, and it is understandable why: Ibn Khurradadhbih says nothing about their country or at least about

¹ *Kitāb al-Masālik wa’l-Mamālik (Liber viarum et regnorum) auctore Abu’l-Kāsim Obaidallah ibn Abdallah Ibn Khordādhbeh et Excerpta e Kitāb al-Kharādj auctore Kodāma ibn Dja’far*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Lugduni-Batavorum, 1889, p. 153–155 (further - Ibn Khurradadhbih); *Compendium libri Kitāb al-Boldān auctore Ibn al-Fakih al-Hamadhānī*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Lugduni-Batavorum, 1885, p. 270–271 (further - Ibn al-Fakih).

² *Kitāb al-A’lak an-naḥīṣa VII auctore Abu Ali Ahmed ibn Omar Ibn Rosteh*, ed. M. J. de Goeje. Lugduni Batavorum, 1892, p. 139–148 (further - Ibn Rusta).

³ *Viae regnorum: Descriptio ditionis moslemicae auctore Abu Ishāk al-Fārisī al-Istakhri*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Lugduni Batavorum, 1870, p. 225–226 (further - al-Istakhri); *Opus geographicum auctore Ibn Haukal (Abū’l-Kāsim ibn Haukal al-Nasībī)... “Liber imaginis terrae”*, ed. J. H. Kramers, Lugduni Batavorum, 1938–1939, p. 397–398 (further - Ibn Hawkal).

their place of residence. He knows only that the Rus take their goods from the “outlying regions of the Slavs” and that they get to Khazaria via the “river of the Slavs”. As for their way to Byzantium, Ibn Khurradadhbih outlines it so dimly that it is not even clear where namely the Rus came - to Constantinople or to some place in the Crimea⁴. Thus we may say that the Rus appeared on the international trade routes just out of nowhere, and the only part of the space, marked as “Russian”, was the trade route by which they went. Moreover, moving away from Baghdad this route of the Rus merchants was becoming less and less distinct to their Islamic counterparts, being lost somewhere in the “outlying regions of the Slavs”.

Tight “Slavic” context of the Islamic reports of the Rus (they take goods from the land of the Slavs, go to the East by the “river of the Slavs”, speak Slavonic language) is not accidental. Ibn Khurradadhbih describes the Rus by means of ethnonym “the Slavs” (*al-ṣaqālība*) which was familiar to the Arabs and calls them the “kind” (*djins*) of the Slavs⁵. Ibn al-Fakih who outlines the similar trade routes does not use ethnonym *al-Rūs* at all and attributes these trade routes to the Slavs⁶. Thus, prior to the 10th century external observer could hardly distinguish the Rus from the Slavs. On the one hand, Ibn Khurradadhbih emphasize the particularity of the Rus, but on the other hand he at the same time indicates that this was particularity within the Slavic community (the Rus are “the kind of the Slavs”), and to Ibn al-Fakih this distinctness of the Rus from the Slav mass became totally indiscernible. Obviously, Ibn Khurradadhbih described in the Rus’ a new ethnosocial phenomenon, which was difficult to define just because its novelty. That this phenomenon was *ethnosocial* in its character, we can conclude from the fact that Ibn Khurradadhbih used the same term *djins* (“kind”, “sort”) to describe the Rus as part of the Slavic ethnic community on the one hand and the Indian castes - on the other hand⁷.

At the end of the 9th century some vague ideas of the location of the land of the Rus began to circulate in the Islamic world. At first they were formulated in the so called *Anonymous note* on the Northern peoples written in the last quarter of the 9th century, the earliest version of which has come down to us in the presentation of Ibn Rusta⁸. On the basis of this information Arabic and

⁴ Ibn Khurradadhbih, p. 154.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Ibn al-Fakih, p. 270–271.

⁷ Ibn Khurradadhbih, p. 71.

⁸ Ibn Rusta, p. 145–147.

Persian authors of the 10th–16th centuries developed a popular geographical image of the “island of the Rus”⁹. Nearly all scholars who formulated certain assumptions as to the whereabouts of the “island of the Rus”, proceeded from two premises that need to be revised, or, at least, to be clarified. Firstly, it is the idea that the Rus should be viewed as a separate ethnos, holding a special place in the East European space. Secondly, it is the belief that Islamic authors, telling about the “island of the Rus”, described the real geographical object within the East European Plain and its surrounding seas - whether the island (or group of islands), the Peninsula (as the Arabic word *djazīra* admits this translation also), a clypeus or an area located between the large rivers.

Considering the composition of the story about the “island of the Rus”, we have already noted that in this case we are not dealing with a real, physical geography, but with the idea of it. The “island of the Rus” is not the real object, but the amount of information about the Rus, a geographical image, formed under the influence of two traditions of medieval Islamic literature that reflect the outside activities of the Rus in different directions - the South-Eastern (the Lower Volga, the Caspian Sea, the Middle East) and the South-Western (the Black sea and the Mediterranean)¹⁰.

The compiler of the *Anonymous note* used two scales to describe the Rus: the first - a microscale, outlining (up to the everyday life details) the social order of the Rus in their locus of power, and the second - a much larger regional scale, showing the place of the “island” in the system of trade relations of the Middle and the Lower Volga region. Accordingly, as to the spatial structure of

⁹ Коновалова И.Г., «Остров русов» как географический образ, в *Исторический вестник*, 2012, вып. 1, p. 42–53.

¹⁰ Most of the orientalists, starting with H.-M. Fraehn, put it in the Northern part of Eastern Europe in the area of Novgorod, Ladoga, Rostov - Yaroslavl, or in the Volga-Oka rivers. Many historians of Ancient Rus and archeologists also support the Northern location of the “island of the Rus” and offer a number of other options of its localization within this region - Staraya Russa, the Islands of Saaremaa and of Rugen in the Baltic sea, the Karelian isthmus. In parallel with the point of view of the Northern location of the “island of the Rus” there are assumptions that the search for the “island” should be carried out in the southern direction - in Kiev, in the region of the Kuban Delta and in the sea of Azov as a whole, in the Crimea, in the Northern Dobrudja, in the Caspian sea (the literature of the issue, see: Коновалова И.Г., *Состав рассказа об «острове русов» в сочинениях арабо-персидских авторов X–XII вв.*, в *Древнейшие государства Восточной Европы*, 1999 г., Москва, 2001, p. 169–172; Göckenjan H., Zimonyi I., *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter: Die Ġayhānī-Tradition (Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, Hudūd-‘Ālam, al-Bakrī and al-Marwazī)*, Wiesbaden, 2001, p. 81–86.

the “island of the Rus” - as it appears in the description of Anonymous - it is two-parted. We see, first of all, the core of the “island” - the locus of power, and secondly, the resource base of the Rus - the Slavic periphery with blurred boundaries. All the rest is totally out of focus, in particular, a great number of towns, supposedly located on the “island” that are mentioned by Anonymous. The geographical markers, used by Ibn Rusta to measure the spatial position of the “island”, are only two oikonyms - *Khazarān* (a part of the city of *Itil* in the Lower Volga) and *Bulghār* in the Middle Volga. In contrast to the reports on all other peoples of the region, in a story about the Rus in the *Anonymous note* there is no indications of the distance between the land of the Rus and other countries and of any neighboring peoples.

Anonymous message is commonly understood in the sense that the land of the Rus was a kind of homogeneous “Russian” space, from which the Rus raided the land of the Slavs. Ibn Rusta, really, says that the Rus lived on the “island”, but he never states that this “island” was populated only by the Rus and nobody else lived there.

If we turn to the records of the Rus in other sources, we will see that they underscore a close relationship between the Rus and the Slavs. Ibn Khurradadhbih directly names the Rus to be a “kind of the Slavs” and tells that they speak Slavonic language¹¹. The Arab traveler from Spain Ibrahim ibn Ya‘kub (the second half of the 10th century) also mentions that the Rus spoke Slavonic and reports that the Rus and the Slavs jointly exploited the trade routes leading to Poland and to Czechia¹². According to al-Biruni (the first half of 11th century), the Volga in his time was called the “river of the Rus and the Slavs”¹³. Al-Mas‘udi (the middle of the 10th century), speaking of the pagans living in *Itil* - the Slavs and the Rus, - describes their funeral custom and states that it was common to both of them¹⁴. He also notes that both the Rus and the Slavs serve in the Guards of the Khazar king¹⁵. Anonymous author of the Persian treatise *Hudūd al-‘ālam* (c. 982), speaking of the Slavic town *Vabnit*, says that “some of its inhabitants are like the Rus”¹⁶. One contemporary

¹¹ Ibn Khurradadhbih, p. 154.

¹² *Kitab al-Masalik wa-l-Mamalik d’Abu ‘Ubaid al-Bakri*, ed. A.P. Van Leeuwen et A. Ferre, Tunis, 1992, p. 336 (further - al-Bakri).

¹³ Абу-р-Райхан ал-Бируни, *Избранные произведения*, Ташкент, 1976, т. 5, ч. 1, р. 473.

¹⁴ Maçoudi, *Les Prairies d’or*, ed. C. Barbier de Meynard et Pavet de Courteille (further — Maçoudi), Paris, 1862, t. 2, p. 9.

¹⁵ Maçoudi, Paris, 1861, t. 1, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Hudūd al-‘ālam*, ed. M. Sotude, Tehran, 1962, p. 188.

German source (written in Latin) *The Customs Rules of Raffelstetten* (c. 904/6) also speaks of the close ties between the Rus and the Slavs: under this statute, the Slav merchants, coming to the Bavarian Danube, come there “from the Rus (*de Rugis*)”¹⁷.

All these evidences demonstrate that the land (“island”) of the Rus in medieval descriptions seems to be not something external to the land of the Slavs, but on the contrary, it seems to be something that is difficult to distinguish from it. Therefore, the “island of the Rus” could be defined as a part of the land of the Slavs, where a new identity - the Rus - was in the process of growing. And the geographical image of the “island of the Rus” shows this new identity, so to speak, *in statu nascendi*. The fact that this was a *new* ethnicity, being in a state of becoming, is seen from the words of al-Mas‘udi that the Rus community was a conglomerate of different peoples¹⁸; from the statement of al-Bakri (the 11th century) that there were “many species” of the Rus¹⁹, and from the evidence of the Russian *Tale of Bygone Years* under the year of 882 that the name *Rus*’ designated “Vikings, and Slovenes, and others”²⁰.

In the story of the “island of the Rus” - in contrast to the report of Ibn Khurradadhbih - information on the Rus trade routes occupied a subordinate place, while the main goal was to show the Rus at their home, in the “outlying regions of the Slavs”, where the Rus took their goods from. If on the transcontinental trade routes of the 9th - the beginning of the 10th century the Rus still could be confused with the Slavs, at their homeland they were separated from the Slavs clearly enough.

It was repeatedly pointed out in the historiography that in the story of the “island of the Rus” the Rus were opposed to the Slavs, but the nature of such opposition was not taken into account by modern scholars. Meanwhile, the delineation of the Rus from the Slavs - as it is drawn by Islamic authors - was not spatial-geographic, but socio-cultural, economic and political one²¹. In the story of Ibn Rusta the Rus were opposed to the Slavs primarily by their way of life: trade (mainly in slaves and furs) was their only occupation, they did not

¹⁷ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Leges: Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. A. Boretius, V. Krause, Hannover, 1897, t. 2, p. 251.

¹⁸ Maçoudi, t. 2, p. 18.

¹⁹ al-Bakri, t. 1, p. 264.

²⁰ *Повесть временных лет*, под ред. В.П. Адриановой-Перетц, Санкт-Петербург, 1996, p. 150 (further - *Повесть*).

²¹ Коновалова И.Г., «Остров русов» как географический образ.

produce anything, and everything they need they took by force from the Slavs. The Rus called their swords to be their primary “means of production” and the only thing to be inherited by ordinary Rus.

An important detail in the description of Ibn Rusta is an indication of the fact that there were no landowners among the Rus (“They have no property, no villages, no arable land”), which implies that the territorialization of power in the Rus society in the end of the 9th century was still in its infancy, and their very state at this time was actually a self-organized ruling elite. The absence of any territory outside the residence of the governor, to which the power of the Rus would have extended, is clear from the very nature of the description of the “island of the Rus”. Ibn Rusta does not tell the name of the “island”, nor the name of at least one city, river or mountain located there, does not indicate the name of the sea (or lake), within which the “island” was located. We can even talk of extraterritoriality of the “island of the Rus”: on the political map of the region drawn by Islamic authors the country of the Rus was present, but in a geographical sense, it was absent, as the “island of the Rus” was located no one knows where. And the reason of it lies not in the lack of concrete information about the homeland of the Rus, but in the reality of the end of the 9th century when the *Anonymous note* was compiled. It is likely that the lack of information about *political* borders of the Rus at the end of the 9th century helped to form the image of the Rus land as an “island”, i.e. space delimited from the rest of the world by *natural* boundaries.

A parallel to the report of Ibn Rusta can be found in the text of the agreement of 911 between the Rus and Byzantium, where the Rus ambassadors bringing oath demonstrate generic identity (“we are from the Rus’ kin”²²), but not yet a territorial one.

By the middle of the 10th century the geographical image of the “island of the Rus” in the Islamic world gave way to a more complicated idea of the country of the Rus. Al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawkal spoke about three “groups” of the Rus. According to them each “group” was territorially separated from the others and had its own town center. The hierarchy of these centers is obvious from the writings of these authors: *Kūyāba* is described as the most lively and well-known centre outside of the Rus, *Ṣ.lāva* - as important but less accessible city and *Artha* - as an inaccessible point for strangers, connected with the outside world only through *Kūyāba*²³. At the same time all three “groups”

²² *Повесть*, p. 154.

²³ Al-Istakhri, p. 225–226; Ibn Hawkal, p. 397.

were not isolated from each other and, owing to the fact that they were in a hierarchical relationship among them, they can be described as the whole, as a territorial political community of the Rus. It is no coincidence that al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawkal emphasize that they use the term *al-Rūs* as “the name for the state, not for the city and not for the people”²⁴, i.e. they use it primarily as politonym.

The story of three “groups” of the Rus reflects the complication of spatial relations in the area of the Rus state formation. What was previously described as an “island” with unnamed locus of power is now portrayed simply on a different scale - as a capital city (*Kūyāba*), which occupies a unique position in the territorial and political structure of the Rus, on the one hand, and the peripheral areas (*Arthāniyya* and *Ṣ.lāviyya*) with its central points - on the other. Thus, in the story of three “groups” of the Rus, as in the story of the “island of the Rus”, the structure of the Rus land is two-parted - center and periphery; the only difference is that the description of the two components became more and more detailed.

A similar two-parted structure of the land of the Rus was marked by Byzantine contemporary of al-Istakhri - the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. In his treatise *De administrando imperio* he opposed the city of *Kiova* to all other Rus towns which, in his words, composed the so called “Outer Rus”²⁵.

If we compare the data of al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawkal with the story about the “island of the Rus”, it is obvious that they also give no information about the geographical location of the Rus and about the boundaries of the Rus - either external or internal, between the “groups” of the Rus. However, the mere fact that they talk about *territorial* and not about any other groups of the Rus, with their capital cities, suggests that the process of territorialization of power among the Rus considerably advanced to the middle of the 10th century in comparison with the end of the 9th – the beginning of the 10th century.

And here again we can refer to the agreement of the Rus with the Greeks, this time to the 944 treaty, where the ambassadors of the Rus made an oath not only as representatives of the kin of the Rus, but also as spokesmen “send ... of all the people of *the Rus' land*”²⁶ (my italics. - *I.K.*). We may recall also

²⁴ Al-Istakhri, p. 225; Ibn Hawkal, p. 394.

²⁵ Константин Багрянородный, *Об управлении империей*, под ред. Г.Г. Литаврина и А.П. Новосельцева, Москва, 1989, с. (further - Константин), p. 45.

²⁶ *Повесть*, p. 160.

the idea of Constantine Porphyrogenitus of the existence of the “Outer Rus” and - logically implied - the “Inner Rus”²⁷. That Constantine speaks exactly about the territorialization of the power of the Rus is evident from the fact that under the “Outer Rus” he means the set of Slavic principalities more or less subordinate to the Rus rulers.

Of course, the degree of this territorialization in the middle of the 10th century should not be overestimated. Not without reason Islamic authors knew only *the centers* of the Rus power, but told nothing about *the territorial limits* of their power, and Constantine called the Slavs “paktiots of the Rus”²⁸ (i.e. both tributaries and allies at the same time) and put them into the “Outer Rus”, emphasizing the fragility of the power of the Rus over Slavic periphery at his times. The initial stage of the territorialization of the power of the Rus also explains the obscurity of recorded history of the Rurikids to Svyatoslav: horizontal lines of kinship are transformed into clearly built patrilineal ones only when the power becomes territorialized, i.e. from power over the people turns to the power of the territory.

GEOGRAFIA FORMĂRII STATELOR: VECHEA RUS ÎN GEOGRAFIA MEDIEVALĂ ISLAMICĂ

Rezumat

Diferite tipuri de delimitare - teritoriale, etnice, culturale, politice, socio-economice sau ideologice, sunt parte integrantă în procesul de formare a structurilor politico-teritoriale. Un punct de vedere semnificativ asupra istoriei vechii Rus este oferit de către autorii islamici din secolele IX-X. Acești autori nu au localizat foarte precis vechea Rus, dar au pus-o în legătură directă cu populația slavă. Distincția între Rus și Slavi nu a fost una de natură geografică ci socio-culturală, economică și politică. În secolul al X-lea, imaginea „insulei Rus” capătă noi valențe, fiind legată de o anumită structură politică și teritorială. Practic, asistăm la teritorializarea unor structuri de putere, fără a avea însă imaginea limitelor teritoriale ale puterii respective.

²⁷ Константин, p. 45.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.