CHAPTER 3

Khazaria and International Trade in Eastern Europe in the Late Ninth and Tenth Centuries

The main routes that connected the Arabian and Persian South with the Scandinavian North passed through the Khazar Khaganate. The custom duties the Khazar rulers received at trade spots are regarded as one of the main sources of income for the Khazar treasury. Many scholars therefore believe that the development of Khazaria depended mostly on its geographical position.1

Commercial activity during this period was mutually beneficial not only for countries that contained the main trade centers, but also for remotely located tribes. The depths of the large and sparsely populated forests, as well as the remote northern regions were the habitats of animals with precious fur—one of the most sought-after commodities in the Muslim South. In return, huge amounts of silver dirhams travelled northwards and especially towards Scandinavia, inciting the interest of more and more Scandinavians towards Eastern Europe. The growth of this trade became possible after the fall of the Umayyads and the rise of the Abbasids in the Arab Caliphate (in 749). The new dynasty stopped the aggressive expansionist policy of their predecessors and established peaceful relations with Khazaria, the trade roads became safer and as a result the silver Arab dirhams reached the Scandinavian Peninsula circa 800.2

The second half of the eighth century saw the beginning of the Rus’ (Nordic) penetration of Eastern Europe, which occurred along the main trade routes: the basins of the Volga, Oka, Don and the Dnieper Rivers. During the eighth century, the Khazar state dominated the middle reaches of the Dnieper and the Volga and probably the whole basin of the Don, with its influence extending to the whole right bank of the Oka. A rivalry arose between the Rus’ and the Khazars regarding the routes and the peoples that lived in their vicinity and provided the goods needed for trade. The conflicts, as well as the allied relations between the tribal formations and states in Eastern Europe all depended on the growth of international trade and the influx of silver coins from the East towards Western Europe.


The initial period of the Nordic ethnic and commercial penetration of Eastern Europe remains somewhat unclear. The earlier trade ties between the peoples along the Baltic Sea coast and the peoples of the south lands can be assessed from the remains of Scandinavian (Swedish) settlements from the sixth and seventh centuries, found in the Baltic region of the East European Plain. The first traces of Eastern coins on the island of Gotland and in Sweden appear around that time. The Swedish settlements, however, appear to have existed for a short while and the trade probably ceased.³ It is not clear why their end date—the end of the eighth century—coincides with the initial period of the Rus’ penetration of Eastern Europe, when the ties between the Scandinavian peoples and the Arab Caliphate became progressively stronger. The settlements in question are located in today’s Latvia, like Grobin, situated in the lands of the Baltic tribe Kurs in the vicinity of today’s Liepaja, and a group of settlements around the mouth of the Western Dvina (Daugava River). The Scandinavian presence in these places dates between the second half of the seventh century and the early ninth century. During the ninth and tenth centuries, trade between the Swedish Vikings and the local population was slow. It was revived in the early eleventh century, after the influx of silver from the East ceased. A certain exception can be seen on the territory of Prussia, on the Sambia Peninsula, where Scandinavian settlements existed between the ninth and the eleventh centuries.⁴ They are most likely not directly related to the growth of trade with the East.

During the eighth century, a new type of settlements emerged in the Scandinavian countries. Gradually, they gained importance for international trade, connecting the Arab East with Western Europe. In Denmark for example, such a settlement was Hedeby and in Sweden it was Birka. Hedeby is situated in the southeastern part of the Jutland Peninsula. It was one of the large Scandinavian trade centers that grew along with the influx of Eastern silver coins. The heyday of Hedeby was during the tenth century. Its significance waned after the influx of dirhams from the Muslim world towards the West stopped. The connection between Hedeby and the Eastern peoples was made through Birka. Birka was situated on the Swedish island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. The settlement began to lose its importance after the 960s (the latest Eastern coins, found there, are dated from that time). It is accepted that this was a consequence of the defeat of the main Khazar trade centers by the Rus’ Prince Sviatoslav. Another trade center in Scandinavia was the island of Gotland, where huge amounts of Eastern and Western silver coins have been

³ Mavrodin 1945, 141.
⁴ Lovmianskii 1985, 114–116; Gurevich 1966, 84.