INTRODUCTION

From the late eighth to the last quarter of the tenth century, millions of Islamic silver coins or dirhams were exported from the Islamic world to northern Europe via European Russia. By far the greatest exporter of these dirhams were the Sāmānids of Central Asia. Northern Europe was also a very important trading partner for the Sāmānids. More than 75 percent of all dirham hoards deposited in northern Europe were deposited there during the tenth century and the overwhelming majority of these hoards were composed primarily of Sāmānid dirhams. In fact, dirhams appear to have been struck by the Sāmānids specifically for this great northern trade.

In a very recent study, Professor Thomas S. Noonan estimated that 125,000,000 whole Sāmānid dirhams were imported into northern Europe in the tenth century. Thus, on the average, 1,250,000 whole dirhams entered

* The numismatic data for this study derives from the monumental and comprehensive catalogue of Viking-age dirham hoards discovered throughout western Eurasia which Professor Thomas S. Noonan had been compiling for several decades. This catalogue is nearly completed. See Thomas S. Noonan, “Dirham Hoards from Medieval Western Eurasia, c. 700-c. 1100” [Commentationes De Nummis Saeculorum IX-XI in Suecia Repertis. Nova series 13] (Stockholm: Vitterhetsakademien) (in preparation). It should be noted that a study such as this would not have been possible without this catalogue.


European Russia every year during the course of the tenth century. These calculations do not seem to be exaggerated, since, for instance, the annual budget of the Samanid state in the tenth century is estimated at 45,000,000 dirhams while the military alone received 20,000,000 dirhams a year from the government. Thus, the entire tenth-century dirham export into northern Europe constituted less than three annual Samanid budgets. While the budget does not necessarily reflect the actual sum of dirhams available within the state at any given time (since it also includes goods and services), it does illustrate the magnitude of the Samanid economy. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to believe that 1,250,000 dirhams or 2.7 percent of the annual Samanid budget could be used yearly in trade with northern Europe.

Samanid dirhams were brought to northern Europe from Central Asia via the lands of the Volga Bulghars on the middle Volga. The southern part of the route began in Transoxiana, traversed Khwārazm, and, thereafter, entered Volga Bulgharia by a caravan route. According to Ibn Fadlān, who traveled along this caravan road in 921/22, it took seventy days to journey from the Khwārazmian city of Jurjānyah/Gurgānj (the last major Islamic city on the route) to the Volga Bulghār capital of Bilīr-Bulghār. In his work, Murūdji al-dhahab (compiled in ca. 934), Mas‘ūdī noted that “caravans constantly go from them (i.e., the Volga Bulghārs) to Khwārazm in the land of Khurāsand, and from Khwārazm to them.” From various centers in northern and central Russia, Rus’ merchants sailed to the middle Volga and there traded their goods (slaves, swords, furs, wax, and other forest goods) for the dirhams which they received from the Volga Bulghārs. The Rus’ accepted only dirhams in return for their goods. Thereafter, the Rus’ sailed back to northwest-