

The Eastern Road

In the famous Hollywood blockbuster “The Thirteenth Warrior” (1999) Antonio Banderas portrayed the character of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan – an Arab traveler who was part of an embassy from the Caliph of Baghdad making its way to the Bulgars. In the middle stretch of the Volga river, at the northern limits of the world of Islam in the 10th century, Ibn Fadlan observed the burial of a nobleman from the north, whose body was burned in a boat. The report on this trip, which he wrote after his return, is one of the most important sources on the great artery of communication known the “Eastern Road,” which in the 10th century connected the Islamic Emirate of the Samanids, who held sway in Middle Asia (the territory of present day Uzbekistan and Afghanistan), with Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and Scandinavia. The axis of this artery was the Volga. The history of the Eastern Road was as colorful as the Hollywood film story.

At this time millions of silver Arabic coins flowed to the north along this road, dirhams made chiefly by the mints of the Samanids, In the Baltic Zone, including the lands of Poland, these coins were the foundation of a global system of exchange, similar to the modern American dollar. Elements of this economic system were also in the land of Poland, where Mieshko was laying the foundations for our state. It is possible that silver from the orient, which was used by the Piast ruler, was the equivalent item of exchange for masses of slaves, captured from the lands he conquered. They were taken via the fortresses in Wolin, the Baltic, the Volga, the Caspian steppes, and Amu-darya to the Emirate of the Samanids, and from there even to Baghdad, the capital of the Caliphate.

The contact of Mieshko with the East is evinced by far more than the large numbers of finds of oriental coins buried in the ground. The chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg reports with curiosity that our leader gave to the young Otto III, the future emperor, a camel. These exotic animals, the primary means of transport on the steppes on the southern section of the road, were apparently not unknown in the Piast court.

“The Eastern Road – the Contacts Between the Societies of Europe and the Samanid Emirate in the 10th century” is a research project which was inspired by the remarkable phenomenon of transcontinental relations. The road connected people who differed in practically every way – culture, language, religion, natural environment – and were separated by enormous distances. The goal of this project is to investigate: (1) What was the course of the Eastern Road in the southern section, specifically between Bulghar and the state centers of the Samanid emirate (we know the northern section only); (2) the scale of the export of oriental goods to Europe, not bound, as research to the present time has been, to the study of the inflow of the Arabic coins. Dirhams represent only part of the goods imported from the Samanid emirate. Parallel products exported were glass ware, weights and scales, silk, ironware, jewelry and also camels; (3) what kind of goods did Europe offer to the East as an equivalent for silver and other goods?; Are there same traces of the presence of people from Europe (Slavs and Norse) in the Emirate?; (4) what was the dynamics of contacts and exchange along the Eastern Road and how it was linked to the other contemporary cultural phenomena?

Our research will be conducted on the basis of an analysis of the archaeological sources registered along of the Eastern Road - the oriental goods exported from the East to the North and European goods exported from the North to the Islamic East. The sources are available to us through the results of excavation conducted by Russian, Soviet and Uzbek researchers over the last past century.

We will study the evidence of the Slavs and Norse stay in emirate on the basis of the onomastic and Arabic written sources too. The exchange and presence of Slavic slaves in the emirate must have left traces in the archaeological, anthropological, onomastic, and written sources from Central Asia. Examining the sources from the territory of the emirate, therefore, can provide answers for the controversial questions: what were the equivalent goods exchanged for the mass of silver which flowed to Europe?; and was the circulation of silver along the Eastern Road a factor in the mass phenomenon of the slave trade in the time when Mieshko was creating our state?

We will realize our project in the collaboration between the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute for the History of Material Culture Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg (Russia) and the Institute of Archaeology Uzbek Academy of Sciences in Samarqand (Uzbekistan).