

Article

‘Conversion’ to Islam in Early Medieval Europe: Historical and Archaeological Perspectives on Arab and Northern Eurasian Interactions

Sara Ann Knutson ^{1,2,*}  and Caitlin Ellis ^{3,4} ¹ Anthropology Department, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA² Institute of History, University of Warsaw, 00-927 Warsaw, Poland³ Department of History, Durham University, Durham DH1 3EX, UK; caitlin.ellis@cantab.net⁴ Centre for Medieval Studies, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

* Correspondence: sara_knutson@berkeley.edu

Abstract: In recent years, the influence of Muslims and Islam on developments in medieval Europe has captured the attention of scholars and the general public alike. Nevertheless, ‘conversion’ to Islam remains a challenging subject for historical research and demands more transdisciplinary collaborations. This article examines early medieval interactions between Muslim Arabs and Northern and Eastern Europeans as a case study for whether some individuals in Northern Eurasia ‘converted’ to Islam. More importantly, we address some key examples and lines of evidence that demonstrate why the process of ‘conversion’ to Islam is not more visible in the historical and archaeological records of Northern Eurasia. We find that, despite the well-established evidence for economic exchanges between the Islamic World and Northern Eurasia, the historical and material records are much more complex, but not entirely silent, on the issue of religious change. We also conclude that religious connectivity and exchanges, including with Islam, were common in early medieval Northern Eurasia, even if it is difficult in most cases to identify conclusive instances of ‘conversion’ to Islam.

Keywords: religious conversion; Caliphate; Ibn Fadlan; Vikings; Rus’; medieval Eurasia; early medieval; material culture of religion; Islamic archaeology



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1. Introduction: Islamic Conversion?

The investigation of religious change in the past, including transforming belief structures, mentalities, and practices, presents a challenging research topic for historical research. Religious conversion entails a complex process, one that can be influenced by cross-cultural interactions, as was often the case during the latter part of the early medieval period (c. 700–1100 CE). The faiths of Christianity and Islam especially left a profound impact on medieval Europe. However, while the influence of Christianity and Christian conversion throughout the European continent is widely studied and understood, the influence of Islam on European societies beyond Iberia was traditionally restricted to the Crusades. This resulted in a focus on negative portrayals of Muslims in European literary sources without full consideration to how the Islamic faith does—and does not—leave medieval historical and material traces outside the Islamic World. However, in recent years, the study of the Scandinavian Vikings’ connections with the Islamic World and the prospect that some might have even converted to Islam has captivated scholars, the media, and the general public. This interest culminated in the late 2017 controversy of the so-called “Viking Allāh textile.” Originally excavated in 1938 at Birka, Sweden, the material generated international media attention for the suggestion that the textile featured the word “Allāh,” which was disproven weeks later (Geijer 1938; Bäckström 2017; Mulder 2017). The “Allāh” textile case cautioned researchers against simply wishful thinking for a more diverse, multicultural past beyond what the surviving medieval evidence can reveal. That

said, scholars must take seriously how the medieval past informs people's relationship to and understanding of the present. Many reasons exist for the public's interest in evidence of interactions between Arabs from the Islamic World and Europeans, including emerging understandings of the 'global' dimension to the medieval period (Frankopan 2019) and of medieval European societies' complicated notions of race and equally complex approaches to multiculturalism (Heng 2018; Kim 2019; Whitaker 2019). Many scholars and members of the public also recognize the urgency of addressing misappropriations of the medieval, not least the Vikings, in contemporary white supremacist (Ellis 2021b; Otaño Gracia 2019) and anti-immigration or Islamophobic movements (Frauman 2020; Hall 2020, pp. 135, 145–46). The relationships between Arabs and Scandinavian Vikings also resonate with modern Muslim populations in Europe, including immigrants from Arab countries and white European converts to Islam, who navigate the affinities and tensions behind multiculturalism, race and racialization, and Islamophobia (cf. Sealy 2021; Hass 2020). As much as we should acknowledge the meaningful resonances between the past and present, it is also important to recognize that the medieval era and the contemporary period are separate, historically contingent circumstances. Therefore, these historical moments should be treated independently in scholarly examinations.

Evidence of interactions between medieval Europe and the Islamic World undoubtedly reverberates with a number of academic disciplines and subfields. Such evidence underscores the important opportunities for and necessity of greater transdisciplinary collaborations, between archaeologists and historians and between specialists on medieval Europe and those on the Islamic World, to achieve improved, nuanced, and more holistic understandings of the past. Drawing inspiration from these academic and public discussions, we pose the question in this article: did medieval European individuals ever become Muslims and why is the process of conversion to Islam not more visible in the historical and archaeological records? Despite the wealth of scholarship on Classical Islam and its connections to medieval Christendom, the possibilities that non-Arab individuals converted to Islam remain understudied. Until recently, medieval scholarship devoted limited attention to wider historical processes across Eurasia—inattention that arguably resulted in misconceptions about Islam. Islamic specialists have criticized the stereotype that early Islam quickly proliferated through only violence and forced conversions, arguing that this mischaracterizes a highly complex phenomenon (Hermansen 2014, p. 2). In light of the vast geographic scope of the Islamic World (*Dar al-Islam*)—more than twice the size of early medieval Christendom—scholars have questioned why the study of Islam is not better known to researchers outside of Islamic studies (Petersen 2005, p. 101). An examination of conversion to Islam in medieval Europe from historical and archaeological perspectives is therefore crucial for helping to dismantle common misconceptions by addressing the influence of Islam and its local articulations outside the traditional boundaries of the Islamic World. This work requires placing the surviving historical sources and archaeological materials in transdisciplinary conversation where both forms of evidence are equally respected and subjected to source criticism. Informed by the Quranic *Dar al-Islam*, we will use the term “Islamic World” here to interrogate a socially constructed space in which Muslim adherents practiced their faith under Muslim governing body. During the Classical Age of Islam, this space included the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant, Persia, parts of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Sicily, North Africa, and Al-Andalus.

Since Bulliet (1979) seminal study on religious conversion to Islam, scholars have evaluated some complications of this historical phenomenon. Firstly, Varisco (2007) questions the application of the term *medieval* to Islamic history.¹ Indeed, *medieval* traditionally belongs to the historiography of Europe and is not necessarily historically intelligible to contemporaneous developments elsewhere. Arabic-speaking scholars sometimes translate the European “Middle Ages” as *al-qurūn al-mutawassita* (القرون المتوسطة),² literally, *the middle centuries*, but this phrase remains anachronistic in the Islamic World, where the notion of a ‘middle’ age is not meaningful. The application of *medieval* to Islamic developments, Varisco argues, flattens the rich diversity of Islamic history, including of indigenous

peoples, tribal continuities, and Arabian developments. Varisco does not address the appreciable overlap between European and Arab history which might benefit from a common terminology—*medieval* or otherwise—that transcends disciplinary and regional confines. Bulliet, for instance, interpreted the medieval period as an era in which religion became a primary social identity—a broad historical process that the Islamic World and Europe shared. However, since Islamic history is far more than the aspects relevant to Europe, we will restrict the *medieval* label here to Europe. In adopting this usage of *medieval*, we aim to respectfully bridge bodies of scholarship and encourage continued research on interconnections between the European medieval period and the Classical Age of Islam.

Second, religious conversion studies must recognize the overlaps and distinctions between religious, social, and cultural exchanges. The motivations behind an individual's conversion are complex and multifaceted, often involving considerations and negotiations of social affiliations, economic life, recognition of religious authorities, political incentives, and spiritual practices and expectations (cf. Langewiesche 2020). Examining these processes in Africa, archaeologist Insoll (2003) suggested that Islam spread 'in irregular pulses, and with far from uniform results' (p. 397). He asserted that scholars cannot assume that a clear-cut distinction existed between African traditional religions and the shift to Islam before examining the documentary and archaeological evidence (Insoll 2003: 200). The transition from one belief system to another is not simply the fusion of two sets of beliefs, but a dynamic process involving the engagement of prior traditions with the adopted inheritance of the new belief system's traditions (Gilchrist 2008). Researchers must carefully consider the distinction between materials that express religious belief and those that more broadly function as cultural markers, not necessarily with religious intent (Carvajal López 2018). Historians and archaeologists therefore argue for the necessity of distinguishing between the cultural and religious dimensions of Islamic societies, to the extent possible. Hodgson (1974) advocated the term *Islamicate* to identify cultural aspects and *Islamic* for the religious, a now often-adopted terminological distinction. We will focus on religious expressions when possible while recognizing that religion and culture are not mutually exclusive and sometimes inextricable.

Finally, Humphreys (1991) argued that 'conversion to Islam . . . remains one of the most poorly examined fields in Islamic studies' (p. 274). While scholarship has grown significantly since then, the specific usage of the term *conversion* requires caution.³ Deriving from Latin, *conversion* was traditionally used in a Christian context. Today, most converts to Islam avoid the word *conversion*, instead describing their experience as 'becoming Muslim,' 'embracing Islam,' or 'taking *shahāda*,' the declaration of their faith. The Arabic language does not feature a word for *conversion*: the verb *aslama* (أسلم), to submit, conveys the act of becoming Muslim. Van Nieuwkerk (2014) thus productively distinguishes *conversion* as an outsider's terminology, whereas the aforementioned phrases indicate a Muslim perspective (pp. 667–86). Other researchers distinguish between *conversion* as an individual's process of religious change and *Islamization* as a large-scale social process and the complex cumulative results of conversions over the *longue durée* (Peacock 2017; Ray 1976, p. 184). Acknowledging that *conversion to Islam* is an appropriated model, we also recognize that many scholars, including in Islamic studies, find *conversion* a useful model for religious change (cf. Gervers and Bizhazi 1990; Mako 2011; Sahner 2016; Tannous 2018; Ibrahim 2021; Brack 2021). We therefore will use this term in our discussions of Islam in order to engage with wider preexisting scholarship but will use 'conversion' in quotation marks to remind the reader of the term's limitations. We also avoid treating religious change as an 'all or nothing' process. Scholarship on early medieval Scandinavia, for instance, has articulated how pagans and Christian converts maintained complex, sometimes syncretic, mentalities and worldviews (cf. Gräslund 2002; Gunnell 2013; Murphy 2018; Price 2019). Rather than treating conversion as the simple transition from one belief system to another, such research has reconfigured conversion as a complex, dynamic process involving the entanglement of previous beliefs and the adopted belief system. This updated approach has not been sufficiently applied to 'conversion' to Islam outside the Islamic World.

In the following sections, we will address why ‘conversion’ to Islam, however small-scale, is an important question for scholars to investigate and why this process is not more apparent in the historical and archaeological records. To do this, we will analyze some key examples of documentary sources and archaeological lines of evidence, rather than provide a comprehensive survey of the available possible evidence for ‘conversion’ to Islam. The point of this article is not to simply identify limitations in the evidence nor to overemphasize the possibility that some Northern Europeans embraced Islam. Instead, we suggest that a transdisciplinary paper that takes seriously how Islamic processes in Europe and Northern Eurasia were intentionally or unintentionally curated or removed from the historical and material records is long overdue and contributes an important, nuanced piece in our understandings of the medieval past. We ultimately find that, despite the well-established evidence for exchanges between the Islamic World and Northern Eurasia, the historical and material records are much more complex, but not entirely silent, on the issue of ‘conversion’. We also conclude that religious connectivity and exchanges, including with Islam, were common in early medieval Northern Eurasia, even if it is difficult in most cases to identify conclusive instances of ‘conversion’ to Islam.

2. Northern Eurasian Interactions with Muslims and Islam: A Case Study

Six hundred years after the beginnings of Christianity, Islam emerged in the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula, based on the revelations of the prophet Muhammad. Following Muhammad’s death in 632 CE, Islam spread across the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent through a succession of Islamic caliphal dynasties.⁴ Historians broadly identify early Muslims in these areas as individuals from polytheistic tribal societies or former monotheistic Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (Lapidus 2002). Early Islam became associated with a conscious Arab ethnic identity as a consequence of the Umayyad requirement for the formal association with an Arab tribe or the adoption of the *mawālī* (موالي) (non-Arab) status to become Muslim. During the Classical Age of Islam, the faith expanded into North Africa, Al-Andalus, Sicily, Central Asia and the Caucasus, East Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. On a smaller scale, Muslim individuals from the Islamic World traveled throughout Eurasia during the eighth to eleventh centuries, including Aḥmad ibn Rusta (*d. post 903 CE*), Muhammad al-Idrīsī (1100–1165 CE), Muhammad ibn Ḥawqal (*d. post 978 CE*), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī (*c. 1080–1170*), and Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān (*c. 879–960*). They describe their personal travel experiences and interactions with a variety of Eurasian peoples, including Han-Chinese, Slavic, Turkic, Scandinavian, and Continental European individuals (cf. De Goeje 2014b; Al-Idrīsī; Maqbul Ahmad 1992; Kramers 2014; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī 1925; Lunde and Stone 2012; Montgomery 2000). Their writings also incorporated geographical and anthropological knowledge of Eurasia from other Muslim merchants and explorers. Because of this vested interest in geography, diplomacy, and commercial activity across Eurasia, the Islamic World achieved advanced knowledge of non-Islamic societies and customs.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Muslims came into contact with communities in Northern Eurasia, a region that consisted of spaces west of the Ural Mountains and north of the Caucasus, including the Volga River valley, the Baltic region, and Scandinavia. Medieval Northern Eurasia featured numerous semi-nomadic and sedentary communities, including the Pechenegs, Khazars, Volga Bulgars, Rus’, Slavic communities, and Scandinavians. We use Northern and Eastern European to refer to Scandinavian, Slavic, and Rus’ communities who interacted with Arab travelers throughout Northern Eurasia (cf. Knutson 2021, p. 8).⁵ We will mainly focus on Scandinavians and Rus’ engagements with Muslims and Islam, since the interactions of communities like the Bulgars, and later communities in the Golden Horde, with Islam is understood and accepted among specialists (cf. Zimonyi 1990; DeWeese 1994; Curta 2019; Brack 2021). From the eighth century, coinciding with the expansionary movement of the Caliphates, Northern Europeans, namely Scandinavians, launched colonization movements across the North Atlantic and other activities of mobility across Eurasia, developments that some scholars characterize as a diaspora (Abrams 2012;

Jesch 2015). These movements were less centralized, political, and religious in character than the Caliphal expansions, although in some cases no less violent (cf. Ellis 2021a). As traders and mercenaries, many Scandinavians maintained extended contact with Muslims in Al-Andalus, the Mediterranean, Byzantium, and Northern Eurasia. Northern Europeans in the Baltic and Volga River valley regions traded silver, furs, and slaves extensively with the Caliphate, building a close commercial partnership that reached its height in the tenth century.

The exchanges between Northern and Eastern Europeans and Muslim Arabs provide an illuminating case study for examining ‘conversion’ to Islam for a couple of reasons. First, early medieval Northern Europeans launched itinerant activities across an unprecedented geographic reach in Afro-Eurasia, often interacting with Muslims and the Islamic World. These exchanges exposed them to Islamic religious practices and beliefs. Second, Northern and Eastern Europe did not strictly follow Continental European developments. For instance, Scandinavians converted to Christianity considerably later than Continental Europeans and they appropriated Christian practices to their own cultural context, sometimes in ways that the Church did not always acknowledge (Knutson 2016). The substantial scholarship on Scandinavian pagan beliefs and conversion to Christianity may find broad thematic parallels with research on the adoption of Islam among non-Arabs (*mawālī*) in the Islamic World and their complex status within their new, broad religious community (Simonsohn 2013; Fierro 2010). This study intends to broaden current understandings of medieval interactions with Islam without subscribing to Eurocentric understandings of the Islamic past (Wood 2008; Lape 2005). Interactions between Northern Europeans and Arabs across Eurasia did not result in simply itinerant humans and materials; these vectors of interaction led to the negotiation of identities, ideas, and worldviews. Such exchanges demonstrate that religious connectivity between various communities in Northern Eurasia and beyond was undeniably part of the early medieval reality.

3. ‘Conversion’ to Islam: Documentary Perspectives

This section considers the complexity of some important documentary evidence for Northern Europeans’ interactions with Islam and the processes that determine whether religious interactions became recorded. The most important sources on the topic are those that document the group known as the Rus’ and their extensive trade connections to the Caliphate. The Rus’ ruled around Kiev and along the Dnieper and Volga rivers from the late ninth century until the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions. They encountered Islam via interactions with Muslim Arabs and Bulgars, a Turkic group situated along the Volga River valley who ‘converted’ to Islam in the early tenth century. Hraundal (2014, p. 91) argues that the Rus’ should be broadly considered as two groups: the Kievan Rus’ and the Volga-Caspian Rus’. The former group has largely dominated historiography, partly due to their prevalence in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, a text that glorifies the Kievan dynasty and credits Vladimir the Great (r. 980–1015) with converting the Kievan Rus’ to Christianity. In contrast to their Kievan contemporaries, the Volga-Caspian Rus’ are significantly less well documented and had greater contact with Islam, especially owing to their closer geographical proximity to the Caliphate. The surviving medieval texts therefore may overemphasize the Christian influence on the Rus’ at the expense of overlooking possible undocumented, or lost records of, cultural influences of Islam on the region, especially in association with the Volga-Caspian Rus’. This strategy is reminiscent of the way that the availability of written sources obscures England’s Christianizing influence on Scandinavia, in contrast to German influence (Abrams 1995). The *Russian Primary Chronicle*’s narrative is partial, inflating some foreign influences over others; these considerations may very well also apply to the understudied role of Islam on religious exchanges in medieval Europe.

The *Russian Primary Chronicle* does provide insight into medieval interactions with Islamic beliefs, even if it is hardly flattering. The narrative describes an Islamic Bulgar mission to Vladimir the Great but claims that some of the Bulgars’ customs, including a description of sexual rewards in the afterlife, were too immodest to be recorded (Cross

and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953, p. 184). Vladimir also becomes discouraged by the Islamic practice of abstinence from pork and wine. This is part of the ‘Testing of the Faiths’ episode, in which Vladimir meets with representatives of Judaism, Islam, and Latin and Orthodox Christianity and chooses to adopt the latter. This account amounts to literary and theological rhetoric rather than an attempt at historical accuracy (Vodoff 1988, p. 68; Moss 2002, p. 18). In reality, Vladimir accepted Christianity as part of an advantageous marriage alliance with the Byzantine emperors. It therefore seems that Vladimir, and the Kievan Rus’, chose Christianity because Byzantium held the most significant political and cultural influence in the region, whereas the Islamic Caliphate lay beyond Byzantium. However, Christianity was not the only, nor obvious, religious influence in Northern Eurasia. Other religious-cultural influences in the Volga-Dnieper region included the Muslim Bulgars and the Jewish Khazars,⁶ whose power waned at the turn of the millennium. While the Rus’ and the Bulgars engaged in some conflicts, interactions with the Bulgars became integral to the Rus’ economy from 1000 CE onwards, after the decline of Khazaria (Curta 2019, p. 151). The Rus’ therefore maintained extensive economic exchanges with Muslim communities in Northern Eurasia that indirectly connected them to Muslim beliefs and practices through their commercial partners. This religious connectivity suggests that Islam, like Christianity, was in reality not so far detached from Rus’ daily life and interactions.

The *Russian Primary Chronicle* account of Rus’ encounters with Islam remains highly suspect and biased against Muslims and Islam, prejudices that were common elsewhere in medieval European literature (cf. Adams 2015, 2019). The Christian context of early medieval Europe likely encouraged writers to avoid documenting historical interactions with Islam in Northern Eurasia. Surviving Arabic texts, however, provide alternative viewpoints. The late eleventh or early twelfth century text of Sharaf al-Zamān Tāhir al-Marwazī claims that the Rus’ sent for someone from Khwārazm in Central Asia ‘to teach them the religious laws of Islam.’ The text elaborates that the Rus’ had previously converted to Christianity in 912 CE, but they found that ‘the faith blunted their swords, the door of their livelihood was closed to them, they returned to hardship and poverty,’ whereas under Islam, ‘it might be lawful for them to make raids and holy war, and so make a living by returning to some of their former practices’ (Minorsky 1942, p. 36). Portraying Christianity as having an effeminate, weakening impact is a trope similarly found in other Islamic works. According to this text, the Rus’ displayed an ‘eagerness to become Muslims’ and they embraced Islam as did their ruler, identified as Vladimir (Minorsky 1942, pp. 23, 36). Although this narrative differs greatly from the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, scholars suggest that Al-Marwazī must be referring to Vladimir the Great, as no other Rus’ rulers were named Vladimir during the period described in the text (Minorsky 1942, pp. 118–19). However, Al-Marwazī’s text remains unclear on this point and seems to use ‘Vladimir’ as a general term for Rus’ rulers. It is also possible that, due to internal political struggles, minor Rus’ princes fled from Kiev to Khwārazm and once there, they may have wished to ‘convert’ to Islam; perhaps Al-Marwazī’s account is an oversimplification of these developments. Overall, Al-Marwazī and the *Russian Primary Chronicle* offer challenging accounts for assessing the historical validity of religious changes among the Rus’. By placing these accounts in conversation with each other, however, historians are able to better evaluate their biases and exaggerations while reflecting on our own contemporary expectations and assumptions. While different scholars may evaluate the trustworthiness of each source differently, these two texts, at the very least, suggest competing contacts and missions between Islam and Christianity in the Volga region. It seems that neither religion initially maintained an absolute dominance on the Rus’.

Provided the limitations of these texts and the paucity of sources from the Rus’ themselves, other contemporary Arabic writers provide important, often rare insights into their long-distance movements. The ninth-century Persian geographer Ibn Khurrādādhbih describes the Rus’ route to Byzantium, where the Rus’ claimed to be Christians in order to avoid paying higher taxes (Hraundal 2013, p. 63; De Goeje 2014a). This issue of paying higher taxes as a non-believer was also common in the Caliphate. The Prophet Muhammad

mandated that people should not be forced to adopt Islam. However, those who did not had to pay a tax (Milwright 2010, p. 135). Islam recognized the legitimacy of religions that had received Divine Scripture (Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism); adherents of these faiths were given the status of a ‘protected group’ (*dhimmi*) and were allowed freedom of worship in return for a head tax (*jizya*). Ibn Khurrādhbih’s comment about the Rus’ pretenses as Christians for economic motivations therefore raises the question of whether the Rus’ applied the same principle to Islam in their trade exchanges further east. If taken seriously, this text casts doubt on the genuine nature of the Rus’ religious inclinations, revealing that some individuals were open to at least nominally changing their official religious position in certain circumstances; it would not be a stretch to suggest that they did the same in their exchanges with the Muslim Volga-Bulgars, for instance, as with the Christian Byzantines. The sources are ultimately silent on this matter, but historians have noted that in the Volga Region, the Bulgars paid taxes to the Khazars and it is certainly possible that the Bulgars’ ‘conversion’ to Islam improved their standing with the Khazars, the majority of whom followed a fellow Abrahamic faith, such as Judaism, and some of whom were also Muslims (Hraundal 2014, p. 72). It is likely that some of the Rus’ found advantages for embracing Islam officially, if not also on a more spiritual level, in their exchanges with Muslims in the Volga Region.

Ibn Khurrādhbih importantly documents Northern Europeans who traveled to the Arab World, including as far as the capital of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate. He describes the Rus’ taking their goods by camel over the final part of the trade route to Baghdad (Mikkelsen 2008, p. 543). The presence of Northern Europeans in the Caliphate is further corroborated by the inscribed texts on the ‘Ingvar runestones,’ twenty-six Swedish monuments whose inscriptions refer to individuals who participated in an expedition to Serkland, the ‘Saracen lands’ (cf. Kromann and Roesdahl 1996).⁷ These sources reveal that Northern Europeans had contact with Muslims within the Caliphate itself and therefore learned of Islamic practices and customs. Most exchanges with Muslims, however, occurred in the Mediterranean and the Eastern European waterways. Certainly, such a long journey to the Caliphate was not strictly necessary for Northern Europeans to have contact with Islam, given that prominent trading centers among the Khazars and Bulgars attracted Muslim travelers from the Caliphate to the Volga Region (Hraundal 2014, p. 77; Shepard 2018).

The most emblematic source of the interaction between Northern and Eastern Europeans and Arabs is Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, an envoy from the Caliphate in Baghdad to the Volga Bulgars who wrote a detailed eyewitness account of his journey in 922 (Sezgin 1987). Formally, Ibn Faḍlān’s mission was to forge diplomatic ties with the Muslim Bulgars and to teach them Islamic doctrine and law. Scholars, however, debate whether the embassy contained additional motives—some suggest that Ibn Faḍlān sought to spread Islam among the Bulgars (Mikkelsen 2008, p. 543; Wikander 1978), while others argue that economic motivations, including the Caliphate’s desire to monopolize the Bulgar market, were the diplomatic embassy’s underlying priority (Montgomery 2015, p. 117; Shaban 1981, pp. 149–51). Even if ‘conversion’ were not the stated aim, Ibn Faḍlān’s account nevertheless describes commercial and intellectual interactions that facilitated religious exchanges. Ibn Faḍlān recounts in his interaction with the Volga-Bulgars that he saw ‘one household of five thousand individuals, men and women. They had all converted to Islam and are known as the Baranjār’ (Montgomery 2015, p. 233; cf. Lunde and Stone 2012, p. 39). While some scholars suggest that the ethnonym al-Baranjār contains a Mongol etymology, this would be a markedly early date for a borrowing from Mongolian in this region. Others argue that al-Baranjār may be an Arabic rendering of the Varangians (cf. Zimonyi 2015, p. 260; Wikander 1978, pp. 21, 57). If so, Ibn Faḍlān’s account identifies a group of Northern Europeans who embraced Islam (Mikkelsen 2008, p. 544; Adams and Heß 2015, pp. 9–10; Adams 2019, p. 94). Given the heterogeneous religious and cultural communities around the Volga, ‘conversions’ to Islam among such a group would not have been rare.⁸ It is also possible that Ibn Faḍlān actually witnessed a kin group or its leaders who had ‘converted’ to Islam while acceptance of the faith had not fully spread among the wider population.⁹

His account later explains that this group ‘had built a wooden mosque to pray in but did not know how to read the Qur’an,’ and so he instructed them (Montgomery 2015, p. 233). Ibn Fadlān also reports that he converted a man called Tālūt (the Qur’anic name for Saul), who wished to take the name Muhammad to honor Ibn Fadlān (whose given name, Ahmad, was an epithet of the prophet Muhammad). Wikander rationalizes that Tālūt therefore cannot be part of the same Baranjār group who ‘converted’ to Islam and he suggests that Ibn Fadlān may have mistaken a temple of the Baranjār for a mosque (Wikander 1978, p. 21). The latter statement, however, remains unconvincing: while Ibn Fadlān might be forgiven some wishful thinking, if indeed it is that, for identifying al-Baranjār as Muslims, it seems most likely that either the structure was indeed intended as a mosque or that he consciously made a false claim, rather than doing so out of ignorance. This latter explanation is not the most persuasive, since historians have long treated Ibn Fadlān’s account as a valuable source.

Ibn Fadlān’s most famous section is his description of a Rus’ funeral. Scholars often previously treated this description as eyewitness testimony of Norse pagan religious practice, but researchers increasingly recognize that this ceremony cannot be understood within a monolithic cultural context. The ritual likely also contained Turkic and other local traditions (Hraundal 2014, pp. 90–91), demonstrating that heterogeneous cultures and religious practices informed Rus’ practices in the Volga region. Ibn Fadlān’s documented interactions with the Rus’ reveal the receptivity of both parties to religious dialogue, if not explicitly religious ‘conversion’. Ibn Fadlān describes a dialogue with a Rus’ individual who exclaims, ‘You Arabs are a lot of fools!’ to which he inquires, ‘Why is that?’ The individual responds, ‘Because you purposefully take your nearest and dearest and those whom you hold in the highest esteem and put them in the ground, where they are eaten by vermin and worms. We, on the other hand, cremate them there and then, so that they enter the Garden [of paradise] on the spot’ (Montgomery 2015, p. 253). This passage reveals differing religious mentalities between Ibn Fadlān and the Rus’ individual, but also an exchange of differing religious practices. This scene suggests that religious dialogue could and did take place between the Rus’ and Muslim Arabs in the Volga region. It is not implausible that ‘conversions’ to Islam resulted from such religious connectivity, even if these processes rarely found their way, like much of Rus’ daily life, into historical texts.

A smaller range of documentary sources on Northern European contacts with Islam can also be found in Continental Europe. Scandinavians had some contact with Islamic Al-Andalus from brief raiding activity. The Arabist Lévi-Provençal (1950, p. 224) suggested that some Vikings who attacked Seville and Córdoba in 844 CE established settlements in southeast Seville, where they became cheesemakers and ‘converted’ to Islam, but he provided no sources for this suggestion of conversion.¹⁰ The ‘conversion’ of Northern Europeans to Islam in Al-Andalus therefore remains unsubstantiated. Other Arabic documentary evidence provides exceptional, but more reliable, evidence of Arabs who reached Northern Europe directly. In 845 CE, the Umayyad Emir of Córdoba sent Andalusian diplomat and poet Yahyā ibn Ḥakam al-Bakrī al-Jayyānī (c. 790–864) (known as Al-Ghazāl, ‘the Gazelle’) on a mission to the land of al-Majūs, loosely translated as ‘fire-worshippers’ or pagans (Hermes 2014; Allen 1960; Christys 2012). This mission is recorded by Ibn Dihya al-Kalbī (1150–1235), a thirteenth-century poet from Valencia. Based on the description of the religious affiliation of the people he interacted with there (claiming that they were once majūs but were now Christians) and small details of the landscape, most scholars suggest that Al-Ghazāl had traveled to Denmark and Norway (Mikkelsen 2008, p. 543; Wikander 1978, pp. 15–17).¹¹ Ibn Dihya mentions that Al-Ghazāl met the king of the majūs, whom El-Hajji argues was the Danish king Horik I (El-Hajji 1970, pp. 193–201). Ultimately, scholars remain divided on whether Al-Ghazāl ventured to Northern Europe or whether the account was Ibn Dihya’s creation, modelled on an earlier Arabic source accounting of Al-Ghazāl’s embassy to Byzantium (Pons-Sanz 2004, p. 23). While the source remains ambiguous and requires interpretations that rely on assumptions and speculations, Ibn Dihya’s text does not preclude the possibility of genuine diplomatic contacts between Iberia

and Northern Europe. Other Arabic texts more reliably record the movements of travelers from the Islamic World to Northern Europe, such as tenth-century Sephardic Jewish traveler Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb (912–966 CE) (also known as Al-Tartuschi) who traveled from Córdoba to Scandinavia in 965. He describes the Danish town of Hedeby (in modern-day Schleswig-Holstein) and the customs of its inhabitants (Curto Abados 2017, pp. 123–27). Therefore, despite the ambiguity of Al-Ghazāl’s mission, Arabic sources corroborate the contacts between the Islamic World and Northern Europe. Such circumstances would have promoted familiarity with Islamic beliefs and customs, even if the sources are silent on religious change.

4. ‘Conversion’ to Islam: Archaeological Perspectives

We now examine archaeological evidence for ‘conversion’ to Islam and contemplate why this process does not always leave obvious material traces. Islamic archaeology informs this work, enabling us to draw parallels between the materials shaped by Muslim societies and similar objects that appear outside the Islamic World. Previous research on Scandinavian interactions with Islam often searched for ‘Arabic’ cultural signatures, namely Arabic inscriptions, on materials found outside the Islamic World. However, in cases where Northern Eurasian communities embraced Islam, this insufficient approach overlooks materials that may not appear to have originated in the Caliphate but nevertheless offer insight into ‘conversion’ to Islam. Instead, we examine Islamic archaeological approaches to material expressions of Islamic practice and critically evaluate how the material culture for Islam finds both similar and different expressions in locales outside of the Islamic World. We identify archaeological evidence typically used to interpret Islamic belief as a starting point and discuss how scholars can apply such evidence to religious exchanges in Northern Europe.

Firstly, expressions of Islam on materials offer invaluable evidence for religious change and Islamic culture (cf. Mahmood 1983; Blair 1998; Hoyland 2007; Siddiq 2018). Scholars have studied early Islamic epigraphy (622–92 CE) and contemplate why material proclamations of Islam (*shahāda*) are rare in early Islamic societies. Johns (2003) argues that political and ideological motivations led to the later adoption of material culture as a new medium for pronouncing Islamic rule and faith. The absence of evidence for early Islamic proclamations is therefore not necessarily evidence that people did not ‘convert’ to Islam or take *shahāda*. Some proclamations of Islam later appeared in funerary inscriptions, while other grave markers avoided inscriptions, especially those containing Qur’anic verses, for fear that they be stepped on or compromised (Petersen 2013, pp. 10–11). These insights on material proclamations of Islam (or lack thereof) can be applied to Northern Eurasia. Just as early Muslims in the Islamic World perhaps chose not to express their religious identities *materially*, Muslim converts in Northern Eurasia may have made similar decisions while also lacking the political and ideological incentives that early Muslim Arabs eventually found. Perhaps Northern Eurasian individuals who ‘converted’ to Islam had little reason to declare their faith on materials, particularly in societies that emphasized oral culture over written expressions (cf. Ong 1982; Stock 1996; Briggs and Bauman 1992; Knutson 2020).

Shahāda inscriptions became prevalent in Islamicate coinage throughout early medieval Northern and Eastern Europe, where over 1000 deposits of silver Islamicate coinage are currently known (Kovalev and Kaelin 2007). These silver dirhams (see Figure 1) typically include Arabic *shahāda* inscriptions, sometimes Qur’anic verses, and the name of the ruler responsible for the mint. In the Islamic World, these coins offered overlapping meanings and references to Islam and caliphal sovereignty (Bacharach 2010). However, across Eurasia, from the Islamic World to Northern Europe, this coinage was primarily intended to foster economic exchanges. Although long-distance trade coincides with ‘conversion’ to Islam in other regions, the evidence for ‘broadening economic horizons’ does not necessarily equate with the ‘broadening of religious ones’ (Insoll 2003, p. 398). Thus, while medieval trade has been studied based on the global distribution of Islamicate

artifacts, trade alone cannot indicate religious ‘conversion’. This evidence does, however, reveal the breadth of economic exchanges with the Islamic World that indirectly connected Northern and Eastern Europeans to Muslims who crafted such materials for trade. These indirect networks of religious connectivity suggest some awareness in Northern and Eastern Europe of the Islamic World and its faith, even if the religious and cultural meanings behind the materials change across geographic space.



Figure 1. Abbāsid dirham. Mint: al-Maḥdī, AH 162 (778/9 CE). Madīnat al-Salām (Baghdad). ©Classical Numismatic Group, Creative Commons License CC BY-SA 2.5).

Other Islamicate objects found throughout Europe also contain Arabic inscriptions, including jewelry inscribed with the *Bismallāh*, glassware, and bronze materials (Petersen 2008; Mikkelsen 1998). In the Islamic World, Arabic holds a special status as the language of the Qurʾān, but it is unclear how much the association between Arabic and Islam translated outside the Caliphate. The presence of Arabic inscriptions on materials therefore does not mean that medieval individuals always understood the script *only* as a proxy for Islam. The best example of this observation is the presence of imitation coins. The ‘Offa dinar,’ struck in eighth-century England for Offa, king of Mercia, is a closely copied dinar of ‘Abbāsid caliph Al-Manṣūr (Figure 2). On the reverse, the coin contains the typical *shahāda* in Arabic and on the obverse, the inscription *OFFA REX*. The Arabic legend on this side is upside down relative to the Latin inscription, suggesting that the Arabic meaning was lost on the creator (Naismith 2005, p. 197; cf. Lowick 1973). Scholars have hypothesized as to why the coin was made, including that King Offa ‘converted’ to Islam; however, more likely is that Islamicate coinage was the most widely respected currency in medieval Europe (Petersen 2008, p. 1081). By comparison, some imitation coins have been uncovered alongside authentic Islamicate coinage in silver deposits throughout Northern Europe, including the ‘Khazar Moses coin,’ (Figure 3) which contains the Arabic inscription ‘Moses is the messenger of God’. This text is an emendation of the *shahāda* verse, ‘Mohammed is the messenger of God’ (Östergren 2020). Researchers assume this imitation coin was fashioned in the Khazar Khaganate in proclamation of Judaism. The ‘Moses coin’ presents a rare example from outside the Caliphate in which the creator understood Arabic enough to modify the typical text. The coin also signals, in this case, that the Arabic script was not a proxy for the adoption of Islam. Instead, the use of Arabic to express an alternative religious preference signals the widespread respect for Islamicate coinage and that the creator wished to position Khazaria as part of this broader, trans-Eurasian commercial network.



Figure 2. Offa imitation Dinar of Offa © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license).



Figure 3. The Khazar 'Moses' Coin, from the Spillings Hoard, Gotland Museum © W. Carter (CC BY-SA 4.0 license).

Arabic-inscribed materials demonstrate that Arabic and its Islamic associations were not always viewed negatively but rather embraced, even when such materials were not intended to signal Islamic religious affiliation. That said, the Islamicate coinage's inscriptions sometimes contained religious meaning in Northern Europe. Dirhams could be considered 'minor missionary objects' to those who could read the Arabic. While most Northern Europeans probably could not do so proficiently, they still conceivably understood the inscriptions' general significance, as evidenced by the presence of religious (pagan and Christian) graffiti on some dirhams, likely intended to neutralize the coins' original religious messages (Jarman 2021, p. 121; cf. Mikkelsen 2002). In some Islamic traditions, Muslims used amulets and talismans, like the *khamisa* (the 'Hand of Fatima') to repel misfortune and to direct positive energies like love and devotion (Gruber 2016; Santa-Cruz 2013, p. 133). Archaeologists have found such materials in the Islamic World, including beneath home entrances (Ennahid 2002). Scholars have argued that Islamicate coins in burial contexts might have similarly functioned as talismans (von Erdmann and Stickel

1855, p. 615). This research's applications for 'conversion' to Islam remains understudied for Islamicate coinage found in Northern European burials, but Duczko (1998) has suggested the possibility that Scandinavians used *dirhams* as amulets and ascribed magical properties to the Kufic script (p. 110).

Arabic inscriptions consequently contained multifaceted, wide-ranging meanings to different individuals in different contexts. As a final example, archaeologists uncovered a glass ring with the Arabic inscription 'for Allāh' in a ninth-century woman's grave at Birka, Sweden (Figure 4) and similar 'Allāh'-inscribed rings have been uncovered in the Volga Region (Duczko 1998). The ring shows little signs of wear, suggesting fairly direct movement from the Caliphate to Scandinavia (Wärmländer et al. 2015). While some researchers question the Kufic-style inscription and whether it might be a pseudo-Arabic imitation, most argue for the ring's Arabic authenticity and that the object was an exotic item (Jarman 2021, p. 118). This latter interpretation unsatisfactorily downplays the object as a status marker without fully recognizing the complexities behind the decision to bury an individual with an 'Allāh'-inscribed ring in a predominantly non-Muslim society. Some Scandinavians appear to have been able to read (or at least recognize the meaning of) key Arabic words well enough to imitate them on their own manufactured materials, such as bronze weights (Figure 5). This is evident by the imitation of the Arabic *bakh* (بخ), meaning 'excellent, good'¹² and its placement alongside pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on Scandinavian weights, reflecting a desire for the object to appear trustworthy and genuine (Fernstål 2007/2008). It would thus be less of a stretch to assume that some Scandinavians recognized the Arabic 'Allāh'—and even for those who could not, the possession of the inscribed ring still reflects a desire to display a connection to a highly regarded Islamic, Arabic visual culture. The decision to carry, and be buried with, an 'Allāh'-inscribed ring reveals undeniable agency, especially as a way to enhance one's self-image and impart an intended impression to others (Fernstål 2007/2008, p. 66). The question remains, if the ring's owner adopted Islam. The object cannot provide definitive evidence, but this should not be immediately dismissed as an impossible suggestion. The woman was buried, not cremated according to Scandinavian pagan traditions (cf. Richards 2003; Nordberg 2012; Lund 2013), which may indicate her adherence to an Abrahamic faith. At the very least, the ring—an object of Islamicate origins or designed to appear as such—reveals receptivity to Islamic culture and to Muslims. Perhaps its owner used it as a signal of amicability or respect to Muslim Arabs who traveled to Birka,¹³ either as a fellow Muslim, a *dhimmī* (likely Christian), or a pagan wishing to establish good relations with the travelers. This ring, like other Arabic and pseudo-Arabic inscriptions, therefore cannot be classified as merely 'exotic', but requires careful consideration to its complex, multifaceted meanings.

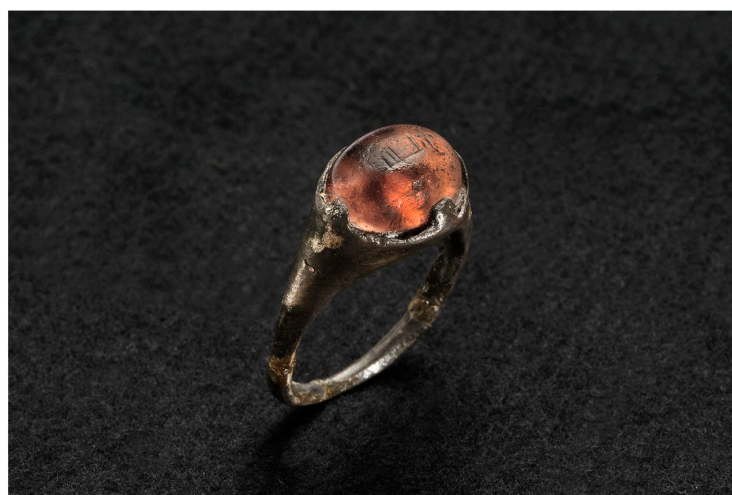


Figure 4. Kufic "Allāh" Finger ring ©Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum (CC BY 2.5 SE license).



Figure 5. Iron weight with bronze casing and Arabic-like inscription ©Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum (CC BY 2.5 SE license).

Muslim burials offer another important source for religious ‘conversion’. The disturbance of human remains buried in the Islamic faith is prohibited, especially for archaeological excavation (Insoll 2003, p. 17). However, historical Islamic prescriptions for funerary rites, based on Muslim religious law (*fiqh*, *فقه*), and their regional variations may provide insight into how past Muslim bodies were treated (cf. Petersen 2013).¹⁴ Deceased Muslims were typically expected to be buried simply, without grave goods, and soon after death. They were often covered in a shroud (*kafan*, *الكفن*) or burial clothes and laid in the ground directly, positioned on their right side with the head, or sometimes the feet, facing the *qibla* (قبلة), towards Mecca. Muslim graves (*qabr*, *القبر*) were often reserved for only one person and are expected to be shallow so that the deceased can hear the call to prayer. From the seventh century, some Muslim burials were commemorated with a grave marker, especially to signal Muslim identity in regions that were gradually ‘converting’ to Islam (Milwright 2010, pp. 131–32). Deceased Muslims were generally buried outside urban areas and spaces occupied by the living, as was similarly the case for burials that followed Islamic rites in early medieval France (Gleize et al. 2016). Bioarchaeological studies have examined Muslim burials, most notably in Islamic Iberia, as some burials are unintentionally discovered in urban development; this research nevertheless reveals the necessity of greater discussion on the ethics of studying Muslim human remains. Current studies suggest that Muslim burial positions were highly uniform in Islamic Iberia, with most heads oriented towards Mecca (Inskip 2018, p. 264). In identifying some broad trends in funerary prescriptions and bioarchaeological evidence, researchers must recognize that local traditions greatly influenced Muslim funerary practices and their regional adaptations.

This discussion reveals how and why Muslim burials are not better attested archaeologically. Firstly, the prescribed Muslim funerary rites of placing the body in the ground directly (such as without a coffin) and in a shallow grave (where remains may be disturbed by later urban development) are not favorable to preservation. Indeed, Qur’anic teachings emphasize the return to dust from which humans were made—any process intended to preserve the body is discouraged. Nor can researchers expect to find grave goods to identify a ‘Muslim’ burial. Therefore, any evidence of Muslim burials in Northern Europe, assuming they followed typical ‘Islamic’ funerary rites, may have disappeared from the archaeological record. Secondly, high regional variation in Muslim funerary practices makes identification of Muslim burials difficult. Funerary rites vary according to different

Islamic legal traditions and ideologies, such as the adoption of *Mālikī* jurisprudence in Al-Andalus. Scholars have also considered the differences between rural and urban adoptions and articulations of Islam. While Bulliet (1994) suggested that rural individuals were slower to ‘convert,’ if at all, to Islam, Inskip (2018) suggests that perhaps Islamic rules were reinterpreted in more remote locations according to regional and local customs and possibly along ethnic lines. She further argues that the presence of traditional Islamic practices in burials in Al-Andalus may reflect the strong Arab influence in the region (Inskip 2018, p. 267). We may infer that the burials of Muslim Northern Eurasian individuals were likely more ambiguous and less strictly adherent to traditional Islamic practices. After all, the Rus’ state, for instance, lacked the intensity of Arab political and social influence as in Al-Andalus that could have resulted in stricter observance of typical Islamic funerary practices. Muslim Rus’ individuals therefore likely would have reinterpreted Islamic customs in their local context. This means that a Muslim Rus’ burial may look similar to a Christian one, based on a shared, heterogenous cultural context, leading the unsuspecting researcher to misidentify the interred humans’ religious identities (cf. Milwright 2010, p. 131). Similarly, a Rus’ individual could have identified as Muslim but still have been cremated according to local practices. We therefore cannot expect Muslim burials to necessarily leave similar material traces across different regions. This is especially the case in comparing burials in Al-Andalus or the Caliphate and in Northern Eurasian locales that had less consistent contact with traditional Islamic customs and Arab influence.

Many other materials provide evidence for Islamic practices. The prohibited consumption of pork and alcohol were (and remain) common Islamic dietary practices that appear archaeologically as faunal evidence for pig remains or in isotopic analyses of individuals’ diet (cf. Lape 2005; Inskip 2018, p. 263). Prayer (*ṣalāh*, صلاة) remains among the most important Islamic practices, as one of the five pillars of Islam. Prayer can be attested archaeologically through bone morphology, as the practice requires kneeling, prostration, and bending the ankles and toes. These habitual movements impact the surfaces of joints, changes that were detected in Muslim burials in Islamic Iberia (Inskip 2013). ‘Conversion’ to Islam can consequentially inspire changes in human behavior that leave traces on the body. Despite the possibilities for osteological analysis, researchers cannot assume that all Muslims in the past always adopted these prescribed practices; thus, the absence of these traces in human remains does not automatically negate the possibility that they identified as Muslim. Additionally, the ethics behind examining Muslim human remains has encouraged archaeologists to seek other material traces of prayer, including the organization of space and architecture. As the locus for communal prayer, the mosque is one such important space. Ibn Fadlān described the presence of mosques in Volga Bulgaria, as previously mentioned, and archaeological research has helped corroborate these claims (cf. Khalikov 1976; Hurvitz et al. 2020). Russian archaeologists excavated traces of a wooden and stone mosque in the Bulgar city of Biliar. The structure was oriented towards Mecca and contained substantial prayer hall space. Some archaeologists suggest that the structure was built in 922 in connection with Ibn Fadlān’s embassy, although others suggest later construction dates (Khuzin et al. 2017 and references within). Next to the mosque, archaeologists discovered a free-standing stone minaret and a cemetery of approximately fifty Muslims. The Biliar mosque thus offers important evidence for some early medieval spaces that facilitated Islamic practice even when they were constructed with local traditions in mind, such as the placement of a dog skeleton beneath the Biliar minaret’s foundation (Khalikov 1977). The mosque’s location within the commercial area of Biliar, like similar mosque structures found in Bolgar and Kazan, suggests that visiting merchants’ exposure to Islam in these ancient commercial centers ‘was a function of the ever-increasing volume of trade’ in Volga Bulgaria (Curta 2019, p. 149). In other words, commercial connectivity in Volga Bulgaria appears to have been related to religious ones (Mako 2011, p. 207). While it seems easier to accept that Muslims from Central Asia and the Caliphate likely exposed the Volga Bulgars to Islam, it also seems likely that Rus’ traders at these commercial centers in Volga Bulgaria would also have been exposed to Islamic practices.

While the Biliar mosque offers an important example of the relationship between commercial exchanges and religious connectivities in ancient Eurasia, in many other cases, the archaeological identification of mosques is more difficult. Mosques constructed from wood, like those Ibn Fadlān describes, rarely survive archaeologically. In other cases, traces of mosque structures may not always appear recognizable as such. In early Islamic Arabia and the Fertile Crescent, rural mosques ranged from large stone buildings to small open-air structures (Milwright 2010, p. 124). Therefore, it is possible that some structures in Northern Eurasia may not be easily identifiable as *mosques*, especially when preexisting structures from other faiths and traditions were appropriated for Islamic practice, examples of which exist across Eurasia. Finally, perhaps mosques were only rarely constructed among Muslim communities in Northern Eurasia, but this need not *necessarily* mean that they did not adhere to Islam.

5. Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

We have examined some key examples and lines of evidence for the interactions between Muslim Arabs and Northern and Eastern Europeans in an effort to nuance the current understandings of ‘conversion’ to, and exchanges with, Islam during the European early medieval period. We also discussed why the process of ‘conversion’ to Islam is not more apparent in the historical and archaeological records. Historians face the enduring problem that early medieval Northern and Eastern Europeans often left few documents of their own. The surviving texts are rarely unambiguous, often due to issues of terminology and reliability. Arabic identifications of the Rus’ and Scandinavians unfortunately do not perfectly align with European sources, but some Arabic texts identify some religious change, even if it is no longer possible to identify the exact group in question. Christianity-promoting sources contain their own religious biases and either avoid discussing Islam, much less identifying any European individual’s ‘conversion’ to Islam, or they deride the religion. Comparing Christianity- and Islam-favoring sources reveal that these faiths maintained competing contacts and missions; Christianity was not always the clearly dominant religious influence among the Rus’. The texts highlight circumstances that led to contacts, sometimes long term, between communities in Northern Eurasia and Muslims from the Islamic World. Many Northern and Eastern Europeans were therefore familiar with Islamic practices and sometimes engaged Muslims in religious dialogue. The Rus’ sometimes adopted religions as a result of commercial incentives and this was likely the case for Islam as for Christianity. Archaeologically, ‘conversion’ to Islam does not leave material traces in the same ways as Christian conversion. Muslims did not always declare their faith on materials and Muslims in Northern Eurasia additionally lacked political incentives to do so. While archaeological evidence demonstrates that some Scandinavians had some Arabic reading and writing abilities, Arabic was not always a proxy for Islam. However, certain inscribed materials reflect a desire to be connected with a highly respected Islamic culture, if not also religious exchange. While the local identification of Islamic practices is difficult, evidence of a mosque, minaret, and Muslim burials in Volga-Bulgaria suggests that some Northern and Eastern Europeans had access to Islamic spaces and practices. Many archaeological materials with direct or indirect links to the Islamic World contained multiple, complex meanings to Northern and Eastern Europeans, including but not limited to ‘conversion’.

The historical and archaeological evidence, therefore, cannot be taken at face value and reveals on closer inspection that Northern Eurasian communities were often receptive to other belief-systems and religious exchanges. Based on the available source materials, Northern and Eastern Europeans were unlikely to be more resistant to ‘converting’ to Islam than Christianity. Scholarly overskepticism about ‘conversion’ to Islam therefore reveals more about our twenty-first century notions about religious exchanges than the early medieval past itself (cf. Coope 1993). This research requires *reflexivity*, a self-awareness of our biased position in relation to past individuals who had their own expectations and values. As researchers, we must be comfortable working with ambiguity and uncertainty in order

to study minority social identities and practices. While Muslim identities and practices likely were among the minority in some communities in Northern Eurasia, this presents a rather different statement than assertions that the only non-Christian residents in medieval Scandinavia were the Sámi (Adams 2019, p. 94) while Muslim traders simply passed through Scandinavia or that Northern Europeans “left the Muslim world alone,” simply interacting as mercenaries or merchants (Clements 2005, p. 10). We argue that religious connectivity does not operate so simply and externally. Rather, cross-cultural exchanges with Muslims and Islam influenced Northern and Eastern Europeans in a variety of cultural and religious ways. Another issue is that many scholars restrict the ‘European’ identity to the Rus’ and reduce the role of the Khazars or Volga-Bulgars to peripheral interactions beyond core medieval European developments. Perhaps for this reason, scholars find it more conceptually difficult to consider that some Northern Eurasians, like the Rus’, may have ‘converted’ to Islam. We suggest that more nuanced understandings of Islam will enable future researchers to ask more complex questions, such as how European contact with Islam eventually became more focused on crusading and pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the later medieval period. At the very least, the historical and archaeological evidence together suggest that the early medieval European reality was different, namely that religious connectivity to Islamic belief and practice was much more part of the Northern Europeans’ reality and experience than scholarship often acknowledges.

This study also reveals the limitations of explanatory models for medieval engagements with Islam that rely on *hybridization*, an analytical framework that implies the mixture of distinct or ‘pure’ *essences*, something that northern pagan beliefs, Christianity, and Islam never were. For this reason, some Islamic scholars describe pluralized “Islams” or identify the development of Islamic practices into highly regionalized forms and traditions (Varisco 2005; Inskip 2018). Instead of *hybridization* or essentialist thinking, scholars must properly acknowledge ambiguity, overlap, and nuance in the historical and material records, including avoiding treating religious change as an ‘all or nothing’ process. It is entirely possible that some medieval individuals ‘converted’ to Islam and then reverted back to their prior religious practices or engaged only a limited range of Islamic practices in ways that Muslims in the Caliphate would have found strange or even reprehensible. However, this observation should not dissuade researchers from discussing ‘conversion’ to Islam as if it did not happen at all or was not properly ‘Islamic’ in character. We argue that discussions of religious conversion as part of a wider, complex process of exchanges and connectivities—without relying on judgments of the validity of past individuals’ religious beliefs and practice—is more productive and helps the fields of medieval and religious studies to achieve improved, more holistic perspectives of the past. In this paper, we often articulated religious connectivity as exposure to or ‘exchanges’ with Muslims and Islamic practices. While not necessarily religious *conversion*, exposure and ‘exchange’ importantly identify past individuals becoming aware of people and beliefs other than their own, often through travel and commercial exchanges, and who perhaps later communicate this knowledge back home. While commercial activity between the Islamic World and Northern Eurasia might have been more historically and archaeologically visible than religious activity, this is generally the case: religious beliefs are intangible, commercial exchanges rarely are so. Nevertheless, the historical and material records are hardly silent on the complex matter of Islamic religious connectivity—and sometimes perhaps even religious ‘conversion’—during the medieval period.

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Notes

- ¹ This is not to discount the important research that uses the term ‘medieval Islam,’ including [Saunders \(2002\)](#); [von Grunebaum \(1953\)](#); and [Chamberlain \(2002\)](#).
- ² All Arabic translations and transliterations are Sara Ann Knutson’s, unless otherwise indicated.
- ³ For an overview of theoretical approaches to Islamic conversion, see [Rambo \(1999\)](#).
- ⁴ This section is intended as a broad, generalist overview of early Islamic developments for non-specialists. The reader should note that the history of early Islam and Muslim ‘converts’ is much more complicated than what can be properly discussed in the space of this article.
- ⁵ Attempts at more precise ethnic identifications of the Rus’ as predominantly ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Slavic’ have long been entangled in the *Normanist Controversy*. However, recent scholarship recognizes that the Rus’ were most likely a complex community consisting of heterogeneous ethnicities ([Androshchuk 2008](#); [Hraundal 2014](#), p. 66) and we will similarly use *Northern and Eastern European* to avoid the Normanist debate.
- ⁶ While the Khazars are remembered for their conversion to Judaism (see [Curta 2019](#), pp. 141–44), some were Muslim.
- ⁷ Researchers have also examined a runestone [G116] at Kräklingbo, Gotland which contains the damaged inscription: ‘...ansi : eftir : mutifu : sun sin : asy : sa-...’ (this in memory of <mutifu>, his son ...). The male name *Mutifu* might equate to the Arabic name *Mustafa*. Perhaps *Mutifu* was an Arab settler on Gotland or a Scandinavian who intentionally had an unusual Norse name that sounded Arabic; but in either case, the name cannot alone indicate religious change. Cf. [Ferguson \(2009\)](#), p. 127) and [Jacobsson \(2004\)](#), pp. 122–23).
- ⁸ In his mid tenth-century text *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma’ādin al-Jawhar*, Al-Mas’ūdī (896–956 CE) independently corroborates that the Rus’ lived alongside people from all religions in the city Itil (Khazaria), and that Muslims also served as judges alongside representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and pagan belief, as well as soldiers for the Khazar ruler ([Hraundal 2014](#), p. 72; [Montgomery 2010](#), pp. 162–63; [Muhanna 1991](#)).
- ⁹ [Curta \(2019\)](#), pp. 149–50), however, suggests that the *al-Baranjār* had been Muslim for some time, like Almysh, the first Muslim ruler of Bulgaria, who had adopted Islam at least fifteen years before Ibn Fadlān’s visit.
- ¹⁰ Ibn Habīb (d. 853) wrote that “one must not eat the cheese of the *Majūs*.” Arabic sources frequently used *Majūs* (‘fire-worshippers’) to describe Vikings, but the term contains a broader semantic range and could simply connote non-Muslims or pagans ([Christys 2015](#), pp. 20–21). For a good discussion of this historiography, see [Farrugia \(2020\)](#), pp. 90–94). A post-medieval suggestion of adoption of Islam is found in the sixteenth-century Persian geographer Amīn Razī, regarding the Rus’ who reportedly “highly valued pork. Even those who had converted to Islam aspired to it and were very fond of pork” ([Wikander 1978](#), p. 73).
- ¹¹ However, other researchers have suggested the possibility that Al-Ghazāl’s destination was Ireland ([Allen 1960](#); cf. [Pons-Sanz 2004](#), pp. 6, 13–15 and references therein).
- ¹² *Bakh-bakh* (بَخْ بَخْ) is the proper Arabic phrase used to connote a value judgment such as ‘excellent’ or ‘blessed.’ Islamicate coinage also sometimes contained this inscribed phrase (cf. [von Erdmann and Stickel 1855](#)). Scandinavians must have thus known of this practice of inscribing *bakh-bakh* to affirm an object’s value but perhaps did not fully understand that the full phrase is typically needed to convey the intended meaning in Arabic, especially since Arabic coins also sometimes use the shortened *bakh*, likely for space considerations.
- ¹³ See [Mikkelsen \(1998\)](#), p. 46) and citations within for the suggestion that Muslims trading in Birka needed a *Mullah* present to lead the prayers and speak for them in front of the king.
- ¹⁴ This discussion on Islamic burial prescriptions is intended as a broad, generalist overview for non-specialists. In reality, Islamic burial traditions varied considerably across different regions, Islamic legal traditions, and over time; thus, there are limitations to identifying historical Muslim burials solely based on textual Islamic prescriptions.

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