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The Barbarians of Central Asia

During the reign of the caliph, al-Muqtadir, in the 10th century, the Abbasid Caliphate maintained influence and control predominantly in the Middle East and areas of North Africa and southern Europe. However, the jihad, the Muslim war cry for spreading the message of God's oneness, and Muhammad as the last prophet motivated the Islamic Empire to continue expanding to cultivate God's kingdom on Earth. The jihad at times was performed through violent conquest, but more profoundly, it was done through peaceful and gradual influence. However, aside from the expansion of God's kingdom on earth, the jihad also served to forge alliances between the Abbasid Caliphate and surrounding tribal groups such as the Turks and Rus'. Thus, the excerpts of Ibn Fadlan, provide a Muslim perspective on how certain groups such as the Turks and the Rus' had certain aspects about themselves that were seen as barbaric and civilized. Ultimately, Ibn Fadlan's account of the customs of the people he encountered tells us about his ideas of a monotheistic, and hygienic state that constitutes a civilization and that the opposite of that criteria is barbarism, as well as cultural rituals that Ibn Fadlan deems barbaric, and Ibn Fadlan reveals it is not possible to civilize the barbarians.

To begin, Ibn Fadlan's account of the customs of the people he encountered tells us about his ideas of a monotheistic state, specifically a Muslim state, that constitutes a state as civilized. One such group Ibn Fadlan critiques on this basis is, "a Turkic tribe known as the Ghuzziyyah" (Ibn Fadlan 10). According to Ibn Fadlan, "They practice no recognizable form of monotheism,

they do not base their beliefs on reason, and they worship nothing—indeed they call their own chiefs ‘lord.’,” (10). In describing the Ghuzziyah, Ibn Fadlan reveals that due to the Ghuzziyah lacking a monotheistic religion, he even adds that they do not base their beliefs on secularism, rather they are uncivilized and worship nothing. Furthermore, another group Ibn Fadlan critiques on this basis are, “a tribe of Turks called the Bashghird,” (Ibn Fadlan 17). According to Ibn Fadlan, “I said to the interpreter, “Ask one of them to explain this. Why does he worship it as his lord?” “Because I came from something like it and I acknowledge no other creator,” he replied,” (18). In describing the Bashghrid, Ibn Fadlan remarks in a bewildered state as to why the Bashghrid worship certain elements, revealing his uncivilized view of another group of Turks. Ultimately, the lack of a monotheistic religion on the part of the Ghuzziyah and Bashghrid Turks, Ibn Fadlan constitutes them as uncivilized.

To add, Ibn Fadlan’s account of the customs of the people he encountered tells us about his ideas of a hygienic state, that constitutes a state as civilized. Throughout the excerpt, Ibn Fadlan emphasizes the grotesque nature of the group of people he encountered. One of the groups Ibn Fadlan was disturbed by was the Bashghrid Turks. According to Ibn Fadlan, “We were on high alert, for they are the wickedest, filthiest, and most ferocious of the Turks” (17). Ibn Fadlan revealed many filthy and unhygienic aspects of the Bashghrid Turks, but the one that stands out is, “They eat lice by carefully picking over the hems of their tunics and cracking the lice with their teeth” (Ibn Fadlan 17). Ibn Fadlan wanted to reveal the grotesque nature of the Bashghrid Turks, as well as the Ghuzziyah. According to Ibn Fadlan, “During conversation, she suddenly uncovered her vulva and scratched it, right in front of us. We covered our faces and exclaimed, ‘God forgive us!’,” (10). Once more, Ibn Fadlan reveals the grotesque nature of another Turkic group to emphasize how their lack of a hygienic culture is barbaric and

uncivilized. Furthermore, another group Ibn Fadlan encounters in his excerpt is, “the Rusiyyah” (Ibn Fadlan 32). Initially, Ibn Fadlan praises the beauty of the Rusiyyah, “I have never seen bodies as nearly perfect as theirs” (Ibn Fadlan 32). However, much like the other groups he encounters, Ibn Fadlan critiques the barbaric hygienic, or lack thereof, nature of the Rusiyyah. According to Ibn Fadlan, “They are the filthiest of all God’s creatures. They have no modesty when it comes to defecating or urinating and do not wash themselves when intercourse puts them in a state of ritual impurity. They do not even wash their hands after eating. Indeed, they are like roaming asses” (33). Ibn Fadlan’s description needs no further analysis he describes, in detail, the vile hygiene if one can call it that, of the Rusiyyah, describing them as the physical manifestation of a human buttock. Ultimately, Ibn Fadlan reveals in the excerpts that the lack of a hygienic state among the groups he encountered was radically barbaric, making them uncivilized.

One final aspect that Ibn Fadlan reveals in the excerpts is that the other people he encounters engage in barbaric cultural actions that make them uncivilized. When Ibn Fadlan encounters the Ghuzziyah he reveals how they perform sacrificial slaughters. According to Ibn Fadlan, “The Muslim can perform the ritual slaughter, as the Turks do not do this but instead beat the sheep on the head until it dies” (12). In revealing the way that the Ghuzziyah sacrifices the animals, Ibn Fadlan describes in horrid detail that the Ghuzziyah beat the animal to death, while Muslims perform a more merciful sacrifice compared to the Ghuzziyah. Furthermore, the Bulghar Turks, another group Ibn Fadlan encounters had fostered a culture that respected venomous animals such as snakes. According to Ibn Fadlan, “I left in a state of alarm and told the king and his companions, but they were unimpressed. The king said, “Have no fear. It will do you no harm,” (25). Ibn Fadlan like civilized people fear the venomous potency of snakes but the

barbaric relationship between the Bulgars and snakes bewildered Ibn Fadlan. Ultimately, the barbaric nature in which the Ghuzziyah sacrifice an animal by beating them to death and the Bulgar's close nature with snakes constitutes them as an uncivilized group based on Ibn Fadlan's critique.

In describing the people, he encountered, Ibn Fadlan reveals it is not possible to civilize the barbarians. Ibn Fadlan reveals this sentiment in his encounter with the Bulgar Turks, specifically the king, with whom he quarreled over religion due to a money dispute, "When he despaired of receiving the money, he instructed the muezzin to revert to a repeated announcement," (Ibn Fadlan 22). Upon not receiving the money the king assumed to receive from Ibn Fadlan and his group, who traveled to his kingdom, the king undermined Ibn Fadlan during a prayer by performing their version, rather than the authentic version at the heart of the Abbasid Caliphate. According to Ibn Fadlan, "You have betrayed the Muslims. I shall accept no instruction from you on how to religion until a sincere counselor arrives. I will accept instruction from such a man." He had dumbfounded us—we had no answer" (23). In the excerpt, Ibn Fadlan reveals the king of the Bulgar Turks had astonished him by not taking the authentic prayer instructions and condemning Ibn Fadlan's faith due to not receiving any form of gifted payments. Aside from differing cultural interpretations of Islam and greed, political reasons also factored in Ibn Fadlan revealing that it is not possible to civilize the barbarians, in his encounter with one of the Ghuzziyah kings. According to Ibn Fadlan, "The first king and chief we met was the Lesser Yinal. He had converted to Islam but had been told that, "If you convert to Islam, you will never lead us," so he recanted" (13). Due to political reasons, the leaders of the Ghuzziyah couldn't foster a civilized monotheistic state. Ultimately, in his description of his encounters with other groups in Central Asia, Ibn Fadlan reveals that it is not possible to civilize the barbarians.

To this end, the excerpts of Ibn Fadlan, provide a Muslim perspective on how certain groups such as the Turks and the Rus' had certain aspects about themselves that were seen as barbaric and uncivilized. The lack of a monotheistic religion among groups Ibn Fadlan encountered such as the Ghuzziyah and Bashghrid Turks, led Ibn Fadlan to constitute them as an uncivilized, and barbaric group. Furthermore, Ibn Fadlan reveals in the excerpts the lack of hygiene among groups he encountered such as the Bashghrid Turks and the Rusiyyah, were so filthy they were far from civilized. Ibn Fadlan also mentions the barbaric cultural rituals and practices that constitute the groups he encounters as uncivilized. Lastly, in his encounters with other groups in Central Asia, Ibn Fadlan reveals that it is not possible to civilize the barbarians due to political, cultural, and selfish reasons. Ultimately, Ibn Fadlan's account of the customs of the people he encountered tells us about his ideas of a monotheistic, and hygienic state that constitutes a civilization and that the opposite of that criteria is barbarism, Ibn Fadlan reveals it is not possible to civilize the barbarians.

Works Cited

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