of the lumber they shipped to Greenland, much as they would have given him a share of any loot they collected in battle. Whenever the Scandinavians went to a new place, they captured slaves, and North America was no exception. Karlsefni enslaved two Skraeling boys, who lived with the Scandinavians and later learned their language. The boys told them about their homeland: “there were no houses there and that people lived in caves or holes in the ground. They said that there was a country across from their own land where the people went about in white clothing and uttered loud cries and carried poles with pieces of cloth attached.” This intriguing report is one of the earliest we have about Amerindians.

The Scandinavians, using metal knives and daggers, had a slight technological advantage over the Amerindians, who did not know how to work iron. But the newcomers could never have prevailed against a much larger force. The sagas succinctly explain why the Scandinavians decided to leave the Americas: “Karlsefni and his men had realized by now that although the land was excellent they could never live there in safety or freedom from fear, because of the native inhabitants.”

In later centuries the Scandinavians sometimes returned to Canada to gather wood but never to settle. Sometime in the fifteenth century they also abandoned their settlements on Greenland because a drop in global temperature made life there much more difficult. These voyages are significant because the Scandinavians were the first Europeans to settle in the Americas. Their decision to leave resulted in no long-term consequences, a result utterly different from that of Columbus’s voyages in the 1490s (see Chapter 15).

Russia, Land of the Rus, to 1054

Around 800, long before they set foot in Iceland, Greenland, or the Americas, early Scandinavians, mostly from Sweden, found that they could sail their long-boats along the several major river courses, including the Volga and Dnieper Rivers, through the huge expanse of land lying to their east (see Map 10.4 on page 278). The peoples living in this region called themselves Rus, the root of the word Russia. This region offered many riches, primarily furs and slaves, to the raiders. Local rulers sometimes allied with a neighboring empire, such as Byzantium or the Abbasids, to enhance their power. When forming such an alliance the rulers had to choose among Judaism, Islam, or the Christianity of Rome or Constantinople, and the decisions they made had a lasting effect. The region of modern-day Russia also saw the rise of important centers before 1000, contributing to even more centers in Europe.

The Peoples Living in Russia

The region of Russia (which was much larger than today’s modern nation) housed different ecosystems and different peoples deriving their living from the land. To the north, peoples exploited the treeless tundra and the taiga (sub-Arctic coniferous forest) to fish and to hunt reindeer, bear, and walrus. On the steppe grasslands extending far to the west, nomadic peoples migrated with their herds in search of fertile pasture.

In the forests, where most people lived, they raised herds and grew crops on small family farms. Too poor to dedicate much land to raising hay, they had no draft animals and could clear the land only with fire and hand tools. The lack of natural fertilizer from draft animals forced them to clear new lands every few years.

The various peoples living in Russia spoke many different languages, none of which were written down. In 500, the Slavs occupied much of the territory in the lower Danube River Valley near the Black Sea. As they moved north and east for the next five hundred years, they enlarged the area in which their language was spoken.

All these peoples, whatever their ecological niche, lived on the edge of subsistence and were vulnerable to Scandinavian slave raiders. After 700, the Scandinavians established trade outposts on the southeast coast of the Baltic and on the Dnieper and Volga Rivers. By 800, they had learned how to navigate these rivers to reach the Black and Caspian Seas.

The Rus were a multiethnic group including Balts, Finns, and Slavs, with Scandinavians the most prominent among them. Of these groups, the Balts and the
Finns stayed in the region of the Baltic and Finland, while the Slavs and the Scandinavians traveled throughout the region.

Much of what we know about Russia before 900 comes from Byzantine accounts. The Byzantine empire had the most sustained contact with the peoples who lived on the north shore of the Black Sea, particularly the Crimean peninsula. The Khazars, a formerly nomadic Turkic people, controlled the southern part of Kievan Russia. In 900 their rulers converted to Judaism, a religion of the book that was neither the Christianity of their Byzantine enemies nor the Islam of their Abbasid rivals. The Khazar state continued to rule the Crimea for much of the tenth century.

To their west, another nomadic people, the Magyars (known as the Hungarians to their neighbors) established a base in the Danube basin from which they launched attacks on the different peoples to the west. Originally polytheistic, the Hungarians converted to Christianity in 1000, when their king was baptized by a bishop from Germany.

During the tenth century, the Bulgars, a Turkic nomadic people previously subject to the Khazars, formed their own state along the Volga River. The Bulgars of modern Bulgaria are descended from these people. The Bulgars paid the Khazars one sable pelt each year for every household they ruled, but they converted to Islam partially in hope of breaking away from the Khazars and avoiding this payment. After they received a visit by an envoy from the Abbasid caliph in 921–923, the ruler of the Bulgars assumed the title emir, and this state is therefore known as the Volga Bulgar Emirate.

Ibn Fadlan, an envoy from the Abbasid court, says that one merchant prayed, saying, “Lord, I have come from a distant land, bringing so and so many slave-girls priced at such and such per head and so many sables priced at such and such per pelt.” He then asked the deity to find him a merchant who would accept his asking price without haggling. (See the feature “Movement of Ideas Through Primary Sources: Ibn Fadlan’s Description of a Rus Burial.”)

Rus traders used the currency of the Abbasid empire: gold dinars and silver dirhams. Rus husbands gave their wives a gold or silver neckband for each ten thousand dirhams the husband accumulated. Archaeologists have found many such neckbands, frequently decorated with small Thor’s hammers like those found in Scandinavian graves.

In addition to amber, swords, and wax, the main goods the Rus sold to the Islamic world were furs and slaves. Scandinavian merchants sold so many Slavs into slavery that, in the tenth century, the Europeans coined a new word for slaves: the Latin sclavus (SCLAV-uhs), derived from the Latin word for the Slavic peoples. This is the source of the English word slave.

**Kievan Rus, 880–1054**

Before 930, the Rus consisted of war-bands who paid tribute to rulers like the Khazars and the Volga Bulgar Emirate, who then allowed the Rus to sell slaves and furs in their territories. After 930, the Rus war-bands evolved into early states called principalities. The history of Kiev, a trading outpost on the Dnieper River, illustrates how this happened. Before 900, Kiev had a population of only one or two hundred residents who lived in villages. After 900, as trade grew, its population increased to several thousand, including specialized craftsmen who made goods for

Ibn Fadlan’s Description of a Rus Burial

Although Ibn Fadlan, an envoy from the Abbasid court, looked down on the Rus as coarse and uncivilized, his account of a king’s funeral is the most detailed description of pre-Christian Rus religious beliefs and practices surviving today. It is particularly moving because he was able to observe a young girl who died so that she could be buried with her lord. The Angel of Death who kills the girl may have been a priestess of either Frey or Odin, whose devotees sometimes engaged in sex as part of their fertility rites. While Ibn Fadlan clearly finds the Rus funerary practices strange, the Scandinavian he quotes at the end of this selection finds the Islamic practice of burial equally alien.


I was told that when their chieftains die, the least they do is cremate them. I was very keen to verify this, when I learned of the death of one of their great men. They placed him in his grave and erected a canopy over it for ten days, until they had finished making and sewing his funeral garments.

In the case of a poor man they build a small boat, place him inside and burn it. In the case of a rich man, they gather together his possessions and divide them into three, one third for his family, one third to use for his funeral garments, and one third with which they purchase alcohol which they drink on the day when his slave-girl kills herself and is cremated together with her master. (They are addicted to alcohol, which they drink night and day. Sometimes one of them dies with the cup still in his hand.)

When their chieftain dies, his family ask his slave-girls and slave-boys, “Who among you will die with him?” and some of them reply, “I shall.” Having said this, it becomes incumbent on the person and it is impossible ever to turn back. Should that person try to, he is not permitted to do so. It is usually slave-girls who make this offer.

When that man whom I mentioned earlier died, they said to his slave-girls, “Who will die with him?” and one of them said, “I shall.” So they placed two slave-girls in charge of her to take care of her and accompany her wherever she went, even to the point of occasionally washing her feet with their own hands. They set about attending to the dead man, preparing his clothes for him and setting right all that he needed. Every day the slave-girl would drink alcohol and would sing merrily and cheerfully.

On the day when he and the slave-girl were to be burned I arrived at the river where his ship was. To my surprise I discovered that it had been beached and that four planks of birch and other types of wood had been placed in such a way as to resemble scaffolding. Then the ship was hauled and placed on top of this wood. They advanced, going to and fro around the boat uttering words which I did not understand, while he was still in his grave and had not been exhumed.

Then they produced a couch and placed it on the ship, covering it with quilts made of Byzantine silk brocade and cushions made of Byzantine silk brocade. Then a crone arrived whom they called the “Angel of Death” and she spread on the couch the coverings we have mentioned. She is responsible for having his garments sewn up and putting him in order and it is she who kills the slave-girls. I myself saw her: a gloomy, corpulent woman, neither young nor old.
When they came to his grave, they removed the soil from the wood and then removed the wood, exhuming him still dressed in the izar [clothing] in which he had died. . . . They carried him inside the pavilion on the ship and laid him to rest on the quilt, propping him with cushions. . . . Next they brought bread, meat, and onions, which they cast in front of him, a dog, which they cut in two and which they threw onto the ship, and all of his weaponry, which they placed beside him. . . .

At the time of the evening prayer on Friday, they brought the slave-girl to a thing they had constructed, like a door-frame. She placed her feet on the hands of the men and was raised above the door-frame. She said something and they brought her down. [This happened two more times.] They next handed her a hen. She cut off its head and threw it away. They took the hen and threw it on board the ship.

I quizzed the interpreter about her actions and he said, “The first time they lifted her, she said, ‘Behold, I see my father and my mother.’ The second time she said, ‘Behold, I see all of my dead kindred, seated.’ The third time she said, ‘Behold I see my master, seated in Paradise. Paradise is beautiful and verdant. He is accompanied by his men and his male-slaves. He summons me, so bring me to him.’” . . .

The men came with their shields and sticks and handed her a cup of alcohol over which she chanted and then drank.

Six men entered the pavilion and all had intercourse with the slave girl. They laid her down beside her master and two of them took hold of her feet, two her hands. The crone called the “Angel of Death” placed a rope around her neck in such a way that the ends crossed one another and handed it to two of the men to pull on it. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in and out between her ribs, now here, now there, while the two men throttled her with the rope until she died.

Then the deceased’s next of kin approached and took hold of a piece of wood and set fire to it. . . . A dreadful wind arose and the flames leapt higher and blazed fiercely.

One of the Rus stood beside me and I heard him speaking to my interpreter. I quizzed him about what he had said, and he replied, “He said, ‘You Arabs are a foolish lot!’” So I said, “Why is that?” and he replied, “Because you purposely take those who are dearest to you and whom you hold in highest esteem and throw them under the earth, where they are eaten by the earth, by vermin and by worms, whereas we burn them in the fire there and then, so that they enter Paradise immediately.” Then he laughed loud and long.

Questions For Analysis

» As you read the above passage carefully, note the events that Ibn Fadlan did not witness himself.

» Which of these events do you think could have occurred?

» Which events seem less likely?

» How did Muslim and Scandinavian burial customs differ?

» What is Ibn Fadlan’s attitude toward peoples whose practices differ from those in the Islamic world?
the wealthy. In 911, and again in 945, the Rus Principality of Kiev signed a treaty with Byzantium that specified the terms under which the Rus were to do business in Constantinople. Throughout the tenth century, the princes of Kiev eliminated their political rivals, including the Khazars and the Bulgars.

Since the middle of the ninth century, Byzantine missionaries had been active among the Rus and had modified the Greek alphabet to make the Cyrillic alphabet, which is named for Saint Cyril (827–869). Using this alphabet, they devised a written language, called Old Church Slavonic, into which they translated Christian scriptures.

In the 970s Prince Vladimir emerged as leader of the Kievan Rus. Like the Khazar and Bulgar rulers, he had to decide which religion would best unify his realm. Our main source for this period, The Primary Chronicle, written down around 1100, explains that in 987 Vladimir decided to send ten “good and wise men” to compare the religions of the Volga Emirate, the Franks, and the Byzantines. When the men returned, they criticized both the Islamic practices of the Volga Emirate and the Christianity of the Franks. Of their visit to the Hagia Sophia church in Byzantium, however, Prince Vladimir’s advisers reported the following:

“We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. . . . We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty.”

They urged Vladimir to convert to the Byzantine church.

Vladimir did not immediately accept their recommendation, but instead asked the reigning Byzantine emperor, Basil II (r. 963–1025), to send his sister Anna to him as his bride. Basil agreed because he desperately needed the assistance of Vladimir’s troops to suppress a rebellion, and Vladimir promised to receive baptism from the priests accompanying Anna to the wedding. Once baptized, Vladimir then ordered, on penalty of death, all the inhabitants of Kiev to come to the riverbank, and surprised them all by performing a mass baptism. Kiev and all its inhabitants converted to Christianity.

Prince Vladimir and his ten advisers conceived of the Christianity of the Franks and of the Byzantines as two separate religions, which we now call Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. The two churches used different languages, Latin in Rome and Greek in Constantinople, and after 500 they became increasingly separate. Since 751, the pope had been allied with the rulers of the Franks, not the Byzantine emperors.

By 1000, the practices of the Eastern and Western clergy diverged in important ways. Members of the Western church accepted the pope as head, while members of the Eastern church recognized the patriarch of Constantinople as leader. Western priests were supposed to be celibate, even if not all were; Eastern priests could marry, but celibacy was required of their bishops. Eastern priests were required to have beards, while Western priests were not. Orthodox Christians put yeast in the communion bread, while Roman Catholics ate unleavened bread.

Although the cultural differences were greater, the teachings of the two churches also diverged on certain doctrinal points. Sometime in the sixth century,
probably in Spain, Western Christians had added a new phrase to the basic statement of Christian belief, the Nicene Creed, saying that the Holy Spirit proceeded from both the Father (God) and the Son (Jesus). Charlemagne adopted this phrasing. In contrast, Eastern theologians held that the Holy Spirit proceeded from God alone and did not approve of the phrasing introduced by the Western church. The dispute was not just about a doctrinal point: the Eastern church objected to the Roman church making such a fundamental change on its own.

In 1054, a bishop in Bulgaria wrote to an Italian bishop criticizing certain practices of the Western church, such as using unleavened bread in communion and failing to fast on Saturdays. The pope responded by sending an envoy who carried two letters (one was 17,000 words long) to the patriarch in Constantinople defending these practices and asserting his right as the pope to lead the Western church. As the level of rhetoric escalated, the pope’s envoy excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople, and the patriarch did the same to the pope’s envoy. Historians call this the Great Schism of 1054.

After 1054, the pope in Rome, whose wealth and influence made him the equal of European monarchs, led the Roman Catholic Church. In Constantinople, the patriarch led the Eastern Orthodox Church, the church of both the Byzantine empire and its close ally, the Kievan princes. (The dispute was resolved only in 1965, but the two churches stayed separate.)

**Context and Connections**

The Rise of a Multicentered Europe

In 1000 Gudrid and her husband Thorfinn Karlsefni visited Greenland and the Scandinavian settlement in modern-day Canada before returning to Iceland to live permanently. At the end of her life, her descendants claimed, she may have traveled to Rome to visit the pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church. She did not visit Constantinople, still an important regional center but no longer the unchallenged leader of Europe as it had been in 500. The intervening centuries had taken their toll on Byzantium; plague had struck at least fifteen times, and incursions from its neighbors had reduced the empire to less than half its original size.

In the centuries of Byzantine decline, two Frankish dynasties, the Merovingians and the Carolingians, tapped the dynamic energy of the war-band to form powerful new armies. The soldiers owed their allegiance to the military chiefs who shared the spoils of battle with them. The Merovingian king Clovis converted to Christianity in the early 500s, and Charlemagne was also Christian.

In 500 Constantinople had dominated Christian Europe much as Baghdad shaped the Islamic world before the Abbasid empire broke apart (see Chapter 9). Just as Córdoba and Cairo became important Islamic centers, so too did new centers challenge Byzantium’s supremacy. The residents of Constantinople looked down on the rulers of the Frankish kingdom for their lower cultural level, but the pope saw Charlemagne as a powerful ally and crowned him as emperor of Rome, much to the dismay of the Byzantine ruler Irene.

Other regions in Europe converted to Christianity and became new centers as well. The Anglo-Saxons adopted Christianity in the 500s and 600s. Farther to the north, the Scandinavians converted around 1000, at the same time as the leaders of the Magyars and Kievan Rus. The decision of these individual rulers to adopt Christianity, whether the Roman Catholicism of Rome or the Orthodoxy of Constantinople, had long-term consequences as great as those resulting from the decisions of individual Asian rulers to patronize Buddhism or Hinduism (see Chapter 8). By the year 1000, almost all of Europe had become Christian, and it remained Christian for the next one thousand years.

At around this time, the first Europeans began to explore the north Atlantic. After being exiled by the Thing assembly in Iceland, Erik the Red went to Greenland, where he founded a settlement in 985 or 986. In the year 1000, using information from Bjarni