

ROUTLEDGE ARCHAEOLOGIES OF THE  
VIKING WORLD



# VIKINGS OF THE STEPPE

SCANDINAVIANS, RUS', AND THE  
TURKIC WORLD (C. 750–1050)

CSETE KATONA

# Vikings of the Steppe

This book explores the relationship between Vikings, Rus' and nomadic (mostly Turkic) steppe dwellers during the course of the Viking Age (c. 750–1050) in a geographical area stretching from Eastern Scandinavia through the Kievan Rus', Byzantium, the Islamic world to the Western Eurasian steppes.

The primary focus is the steppe influence on the development of Scandinavian-Rus' culture. It illustrates the effects of Turkic (nomadic) cultures on the evolving Scandinavian-Rus' communities in their military technology and tactics, as well as in everyday customs, ritual traditions and religious perceptions, whilst paying attention to the politico-commercial necessities and possible communication channels tying these two cultures, normally considered to be distinct, together. The arguments are supported by a multi-disciplinary analysis of diverse historical and archaeological materials occasionally supplemented with linguistic evidence. The result is a comprehensive evaluation of the relations of the Scandinavians active in the 'East' with Turkic groups and brings the (so far neglected) steppes into Viking studies in general.

The book will fill a serious scholarly gap in the field of Viking studies and will be read by both academics and students interested in the archaeological and historical sources concerned with the traditions of the 'Eastern Vikings'.

**Csete Katona** earned a PhD in History at the University of Debrecen. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at Central European University and employed as a research assistant at Pázmány Péter Catholic University. His research interest is the Vikings in the East, on which he has several publications in English and Hungarian.

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The editorial management of this book series is supported by the Swedish Research Council project *The Viking Phenomenon* (2015–00466).

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Cover image: Henryk Siemiradzki – Warriors Battle Silistria. Artefact/  
Alamy Stock Photo

First published 2023

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa  
business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-367-48075-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-34075-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-03785-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003037859

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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# Preface and acknowledgments

This book deals with the interactions of Scandinavians, Rus' and the inhabitants of the steppes during the Viking Age (c. 750–1050 CE). As these labels indicate, the geographic boundaries of the topic encompass (mostly) Eastern Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, the Baltics, European Russia and in a few cases even territories beyond. It is an immense challenge to present even parts of the history of roughly three centuries over such a vast territory and among such varied people, especially when the available evidence is so complex and exists in both material and written forms, the latter in a wide variety of ancient languages, including Arabic, Persian, Old Church Slavonic, Old Norse, Latin and Byzantine Greek. No researcher can be equally knowledgeable in all these types of sources; thus, it is necessary to explain my position and outline my intentions in writing this book.

Such a subject could have been addressed (and has previously been addressed by others) based on just one type of surviving evidence, from the viewpoint of various disciplines, or within a specific framework of Scandinavian, Russian or steppe history. Here, as a historian, I have aimed for a synthesis and attempted to establish a basic narrative. The primary goal was to bring the Western Eurasian steppes onto the horizon of Viking studies. This corresponds to my original background as a history student in Hungary, where studies of the steppe people occupy a prominent position in curricula, also to my training in Old Norse studies in Iceland and Denmark. Accordingly, the book presents a 'steppe perspective' on the Viking diasporas and introduces this world to scholars working in related fields. This naturally means that some facts receive more attention than others in order to familiarize the reader with the situation. A reader coming from a different background may also find some useful information. The impact the steppe had on neighbouring cultures should appeal to scholars and students working on early Russian or Turkic steppe history. The various types of contacts among these groups deserve systematic treatment. The book admittedly has a Hungarian bias in the archaeological material, not only because I know this material the best and it is accessible to me but also because I feel able to extend the picture drawn by previous works on this topic, which were mostly case studies.

Keeping the audience in mind, I have tried to provide easily accessible translations of sources written in languages other than Old Norse, Latin or Greek. These are mostly Arabic and Slavic sources that are fortunately accessible in English

translations. In some cases, the reader will not find ‘dual’ references to sources (that is, a translation and an original edition), as I have used bilingual editions. When these were unavailable I used the original editions, and for the Persian sources, which I am unfortunately unable to read, I have relied on translations. Since I am not equally familiar with all the source languages, I received great help from specialists in cases when sources’ terminologies required deeper analysis.

One of the most difficult tasks was to decide on a principle of transcription for foreign words. Given the wide variety of source languages, I felt it would be disturbing to leave everything in the original, but anglicizing everything also raised problems. I have to confess I did not opt for consistency. Geographical names are mostly anglicized unless they appear in quotes. I preferred the simpler forms (e.g. in case of Russian names: Gnezdovo instead of Gnězdovo), but left the original expressions intact (e.g. Staraya Ladoga instead of Old Ladoga, Rurikovo Gorodische instead of Rurik’s stronghold). Arabic personal names remained in the original, but geographical names are replaced with the English equivalents. Arabic letters are transcribed with the simplest possible combination of Latin letters in which long vowels are indicated with a dash. Since I expect many readers to come from Viking studies, Old Norse names appear in the original with a few exceptions. They are not inflected if they come from a source that is not written in Old Norse (e.g. Asmund instead of Ásmundr). To accommodate other readers, it somehow felt odd to use Haraldr Gormsson instead of Harald Bluetooth or Knútr inn ríki instead of Cnut the Great, therefore rulers’ names appear in anglicized forms. Byzantine and Latin names are also anglicized, as similarly it felt more natural to refer to Constantine Porphyrogenitus (the Latinized version) than to Kōnstantinos Porphyrogennētos. In the case of ethnonyms or geographical names that have multiple spellings in the literature, I resorted to options depending on the situation. Thus, Bulghars denotes the Volga Bulgars, but Bulgar refers to their town or applies to the Danube Bulgars to avoid confusion. The word Rus’ is used with an apostrophe throughout, denoting both singular and plural.

The basic structure of the book is based on my PhD dissertation, defended in 2019 at the University of Debrecen (Hungary). This book, however, is a re-conceptualized and elaborated version that has been partly developed at Central European University (Vienna), where I am enrolled in further studies. It also evolved thanks to comments from colleagues on various parts of the manuscript that were published or presented at conferences. I am grateful to all who contributed to its completion. Financial support for the writing of this book was provided by research scholarships from Central European University, the “Our Eastern Heritage Interdisciplinary Historical- and Archaeological Research Group of Pázmány Péter Catholic University” (TUDFO/51757–1/2019/ITM) and the “Legends of the Eastern Vikings” research group, who generously funded my research stay in Iceland in 2020.

Here I express my gratitude to a wide range of people who contributed to this work in some way. First, I am most indebted to my supervisors at the University of Debrecen and Central European University, Attila Bárány and József Laszlovszky. My dissertation benefited from detailed comments by István Vásáry, Márta

Font and Szabolcs Polgár, all of whom I am immensely grateful for pointing out my inaccuracies. Although the text has developed and been restructured, their constructive criticism remains decisive. Earlier drafts of individual chapters (some in the form of a previous MA thesis) have also been read by Judith Jesch, Neil Price, Terry Gunnell, Jonathan Shepard and Sverrir Jakobsson. I thank all of them for suggestions or concerns expressed about some of my argumentation. The first draft of the entire manuscript was read by Péter Langó, whose expertise in archaeology is evident in corresponding parts of the manuscript. I also thank Heinrich Härke for a thorough reading of a later version of the manuscript and Sven Kalmring for suggesting literature. The editors of the *Routledge Archaeologies of the Viking World* series, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Neil Price and Ben Raffield, have always responded to queries during the submission process. I thank them for their utmost patience with me and also for their extremely valuable comments on the manuscript, which made the final version of this book much more nuanced and hopefully more attractive to readers. The submission process also became much smoother due to the always quick and efficient assistance of Roy Manas, the editorial assistant for the series. Gratitude also goes to Attila Türk for corresponding on my behalf with Ukrainian and Russian institutes and scholars in order to obtain images and secondary literature. These colleagues, especially Sergei Kainov and Oleksiy Komar, as well as the museums that supplied images, also merit my gratitude. Credit for drawing the maps and images in the book goes to Béla Nagy and Krisztián Balla respectively. Other scholars helped me with languages, István Lánckzy and László Tüske for the Arabic sources, István Kovács for Byzantine Greek and Judith Rasson for correcting my English. Naturally, all remaining errors are my own.

I also thank the colleagues with whom I have conducted fruitful discussions about academic life and the writing of this book in general: Zoltán Véber, László Szabolcs Gulyás, Dorottya Uhrin, David Rockwell and Daria Segal. Lastly, I thank my family and my friends all over the world, without whom this book would never have been finished. Sorrowfully, I dedicate this work to the memory of three friends, Gyuri, Gabi and Ádám, who passed away tragically in traffic accidents. This is a modest recompense for their friendship.

Csete Katona  
Budapest, 2021

My research was conducted within a project framework entitled Archaeology Research on the Contacts between Hungary and the East (Our Eastern Heritage, PPCU History and Archaeology Interdisciplinary Research Team; TKP2020-NKA-11), with the support of Thematic Excellence Program, National Research, Development and Innovation Office.