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"The icy heart"
On the ethnonym *wīsū* in the Arabic tradition

1. Introduction

As our jubilarian has shown in his magisterial overview of the ethnonyms of the Finnic peoples (Grünthal 1997: 97–112), there are still some mysteries surrounding the endonym and the exonyms of the Veps; even the very etymology of the word 'Veps' is still unknown. The Veps have also always been somewhat of an outlier among the Finnic peoples, and not only in a geographical sense. They were only "discovered" in the 1830s by Sjögren (cf. Branch 1973: 83–86; cf. also Grünthal 1997: 160); due to its purported archaism, the language has been said to be the "Sanskrit" of Finnic,[1] and the forebears of the Veps lived (or traded) so far eastwards that they seem to have had contact with the Komi.[2] However, there are also compelling indications that there were (trade) connections between the Veps and the Arab world. This is not surprising, and one manifestation of this are the Arab *dirhams*, i.e., silver coins (mostly) minted by the Abbasids and the Samanids, which have been found in their millions in northern and eastern Europe. Such coins have made their way to Ireland and Iceland, and they have even been found around the coast of Lake Onega, right

1. "Ja mikä juhlallinen tuntu tuossa vepsän kielessä, ei sitä Europaeus aikoinaan suotta kutsunut »suomen sanskritiksi»" (Kettunen 1945: 277).
2. More attention has been paid to Eastern Finnic/Veps loans in Komi; there is very little research on possible Komi loans in Veps (cf., e.g., Ernits 1975).

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Itämeren kieliapajilta Volgan verkoille: Pühendusteos Riho Grünthalile 22. mail 2024 (Suomalais-Ugrilaisen Seuran Toimituksia = Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne 278), 145–160
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in the Veps area (for a map of dirham finds and of the routes these coins were traded along, see Haavio 1965: 69, 73, and Kilger 2007: 201).

In addition to a detailed exposition of the occurrences of *veps-* (in all its variants) in toponyms and in Latin and Old Russian sources, and a discussion of the possible etymologies, Grünthal[3] also once again reminds us of the interesting fact that the ethnonym denoting the Veps also occurs in Arabic-language sources of the 10th–12th century. That the Arabs knew of the *wīsū*,[4] a people who lived a long way away from Bolghar, the capital of the Volga Bulgar state (which was well known to the Arabs), has already long been established fact. Best known is perhaps the mention of the *wīsū* in an account of a voyage to Bolghar made in 921–922 by a certain Ibn Fadlān, sent there as the secretary of a mission from the Abbasid court in Baghdad to the Volga Bulgar vassal-king under the Khazars. This account is especially well known because of Ibn Fadlān's gripping description of a Rus' funeral, and because of his palpable disgust at the Rus' ablutionary customs when he observes the men wash their faces in a bowl filled with nasal mucus (for an English rendering see, e.g., Lunde & Stone 2012, Montgomery 2014, or Montgomery 2017). However, the ethnonym *wīsū* also occurs in a number of other Arabic geographical treatises from the 10th–12th centuries, and the main aim of this article is to look in slightly more detail at the Arabic forms of the ethnonym *wīsū*; my objective is not to discuss the ethnic background of the peoples denoted as *wīsū* by the Arab[5] geographers, nor to go into detail about the millennium-old trade between the Arabs and the peoples of the north (for this see, e.g., Noonan 1998).

It must be mentioned that in these Arabic sources the *wīsū* are also nearly always mentioned together with the *yūrā*, who have been tentatively identified with Yugra (and therefore the Ugric peoples), but in this article I will limit myself to the *wīsū* only. Also, the word *wīsū* is occasionally thought to be concealed in other names for specific geographical areas. Thus, Minorsky (1937: 309), in his magisterial commentary on the anonymous Persian-language *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam* ('The Regions of the World') from 982 AD, speculatively connects the second part of <يغسون يا سو> /y.ghsūn-yāsū/, an area purportedly somewhere between the rivers Volga and Irtysh (the Irtysh is here certainly a mistake), to *īsū* and the second part to *yūrā*, but speculation

3. Or *Rihū ibn Wīljū ibn Wīlām Āl al-Wadi al-Akhdari al-Finlandī al-Estonī*, as he might have been called had he had been a 10th century Arab geographer.

4. As Arabic does not have capital letters, I write *wīsū* instead of *Wīsū*.

5. Not all writers of these Arabic-language treatises were necessarily Arabs; e.g., al-Marwazī, born in Merv in present-day Turkmenistan as his *nisba* or '(onomastic) attribution' indicates, was almost certainly a native speaker of Persian. However, for reasons of simplicity I will refer to "Arabs" in the present article.

this construal should remain; Göckenjan & Zimonyi (2001: 204) also point out that this identification is unlikely.

Incidentally, not all authors agree that the ethnonym written as *wīsū* in these Arabic treatises necessarily refers to the Veps; thus, e.g., Leont'ev (1996: 5) connects it to the peoples of the Prikamye. There have also been previous attempts to connect the *wīsū* to the Samoyeds (Westberg 1899: 221–222) and to the Komi (Talickij 1941), but these have found no support (cf. also Golubeva 1973: 9); neither are newer efforts by Komi historians (e.g., Saveljeva & Korolev 1990: 86; Belavin 1995: 77) to do so in any way convincing.

2. Instances of *wīsū* in Arabic sources

The name *wīsū* (or *īsū*), referring either to a toponym or an ethnonym, occurs in a number of Arabic sources, many of which are compilations of previous works. Numerous occurrences of the word therefore does not necessarily mean there were corresponding instances where the Arabs heard of the *wīsū*; rather, texts were copied and re-copied, and concurrently the word meandered from manuscript to manuscript, and, as is usual and unavoidable in such cases, changed its form. Transliterating these corrupted forms into European languages then again added another layer of inconsistency. Below is a surely incomplete list of forms referring to the *wīsū* commonly found in translations into European languages of Arabic (and Persian) geographical treatises:

> *Absnur* (Frähn 1823: 211, 217), *Aisu* (Frähn 1823: 209), *Ayswā* (Ali 1967: 137; Kennedy 1973: 76), *Dalsur* (Frähn 1823: 215), *Disur* (Frähn 1823: 207, 208, 212, 215), *D-lsu* (Frähn 1823: 208, 215), *D-lsua* (Frähn 1823: 208), *Iso* (Togan 1939: 170), *Isu* (Frähn 1823: 209), *Ouiasou* (Frähn 1823: 205), *Oualsou* (Frähn 1823: 205, 210), *Rasu* (Frähn 1823: 208, 216), *Rasua* (Frähn 1823: 208), *Uaisua* (Rasmussen 1814: 83), *Ualsu* (Frähn 1823: 206; Rasmussen 1814: 83), *Veso* (Togan 1939: 170), *весу/vesu* (Golubova 1973: 7), *Waisua* (Frähn 1823: 205), *Walik* (Frähn 1823: 208, 214), *Walsu* (Frähn 1823: 205, 214), *Wischu* (Frähn 1823: 207, 213), *Wiso* (Togan 1939: 67, 72), *Wīso* (Togan 1939: 55) *Wisu* (Frähn 1823: passim), *Wisü* (Frähn 1823: 212), *wīswā* (Togan 1939: 55, 67, 72), *Yaso* (Togan 1939: 170).

Discovering the causes for this riot of forms may seem daunting, but fortunately much of the spadework has already been carried out by Christian Martin Joachim Frähn, the 19th century German/Russian orientalist and author of *Ibn Foszlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen älterer Zeit*, who

states authoritatively: "Es lassen sich alle jene Corruptionen im Arabischen ohne Zwang auf eine ursprüngliche Schreibart zurückführen; es lässt sich zeigen, wie die übrigen aus dieser entstanden sind, und wie eine aus der andern sich noch weiter fort gebildet hat." (Frähn 1823: 212). We therefore need not scrutinize all forms in Frähnian detail, and a brief look at the Arabic alphabet will already show why there are so many variants of *wīsū*. The alphabet comprises 28 letters; 15 of these consist of a "body" of the letter, supplemented by diacritics (*iʿjām*); many consonants are in fact only differentiated by these diacritics (e.g., <ح> /ḥ/, <ج> /j/ and <خ> /kh/). However, not only are diacritics often partially left out in manuscripts, there is also an especially vexatious writing style, which uses no diacritics at all, where the letters consist only of the consonant skeleton (cf. Kaplony 2008).[6] This of course leads to problems in reading, as the above letters /ḥ, j, kh/ would all be written as <ح>, and we can begin to understand the reasons behind the profusion of forms we find for *wīsū*, found in various existing manuscripts. In addition, we often only have a copy of an original manuscript, or perhaps only a (thousand-year-old worm-eaten) copy of a copy; the chances that mistakes are made are high, and when these Arabic forms were then again transliterated into a European language the possibilities to go wrong were endless.[7] When then, e.g., the <ي> /ī/ – the second letter in <ويسو> /wīsū/ – is written without the subscript dots, it can easily, if written carelessly, have a slightly elongated "head" (i.e., the upright part), and then easily be read as <ل> /l/. We can therefore see how easily an original <ويسو> /wīsū/, if written without the subscript dots, could have been read as <ولسو> /w-lsū/.

It must be mentioned here that there is an additional complication, namely, (standard) Arabic has three pairs of vowels: the short vowels /a i u/ and the long vowels /ā ī ū/; the short vowels, however, are generally not written. We thus have various layers of ambiguity, where we have to deal with two possible levels of uninformative orthography (the style where we cannot differentiate between many consonants, and standard orthography, fully diacriticized with regard to consonants as opposed to the bare skeleton, but nevertheless without any indication of short vowels[8]). Confronted with an incorrect form like <ولسو> /w-lsū/, the reading could therefore have been /walsū/,

6. Gacek (2009: 145) points out that the use of diacritics was often seen as a "vice or defect" and that "... officials in the treasury (*kuttāb al-amwāl*) did not use pointing at all and that there was an opinion that too many diacritical points in a letter was an insult to the recipient".

7. This was already pointed out by Haavio (1965: 34).

8. The fully diacriticized and vowelled style usually only occurs in the Quran, poetry, and school books.

/wilsū/ or /wulsū/ (a vowel must be inserted after the /w/, as the phonotactics of standard Arabic does not allow consonant clusters). This explains all the forms with an *l*; the forms with initial *d-* can also be easily explained: if the circle at the top of <و> /w/ is not carefully drawn, it can easily be mistaken for <د> /d/. There are also forms such as <ويشو> /wišū/ with a <ش> /š/ instead of <س> /s/;[9] i.e., occasionally, diacritics which should not be there are added.

We are not done yet. We saw above that there are also a number of forms ending in *-r*, such as *dalsur* or *disur*. These can be explained by the usage, in a number of forms, of the purely graphical *alif* <ا>, a so-called *alif al-wiqāya* 'the *alif* of protection',[10] e.g., <ويسوا> /wīsū/, as in al-Ghārnatī (see Dubler 1953: 13). This *alif* is not pronounced, but if the *alif* is written hastily, and not perfectly straight,[11] it can easily resemble <ر> /r/. Taking all these possibilities for inaccuracy into account,[12] it is no surprise that <ويسو> /wīsū/ can end up being written as <دلسور> /dalsur/. Even a perfectly correct form such as Arabic <ويسوا>, with a final graphical (i.e., unpronounced) *alif*, and generally transliterated as /wīsū/, can also easily end up being transliterated as /wīswā/: the letter *waw* <و> should in this case be read as the long vowel /ū/, but when (incorrectly) reading the graphical *alif* as /ā/ one has to, however, read <و> as /w/, leading to /wīswā/. This is apparently what, e.g., de Guignes (1789: 543) did, but as he wrote in French he logically transliterated it as <Ouiſaoua>, a form one would surely not immediately think to connect to any form of the word *Veps*.

Finally, why, in at least two sources (al-Bīrūnī and al-Marwazī; see below), do we find *īsū* instead of *wīsū*? This is probably, as Minorsky (1942: 113) points out, due to confusion of the initial *waw* <و> with a (graphical) *alif* <ا>. These graphemes perhaps at first glance do not particularly resemble each other; however, if the *waw* is written carelessly and the circle not completely closed, it can be mistaken for a carelessly written *alif*, especially as it was also often written with a so-called *head-serif* – a small graphic element at the head of the letterform which made it look even more like an *alif* (and which, depending on manuscript style, could be either forbidden, obligatory, or optional (Gacek 2009: 7–8, 122–123)).

9. Note that in Arabic, most letters have four forms: isolated, initial, medial, and final, which can differ significantly.

10. See, e.g., Frähn 1823: 214; Togan 1939: 3, footnote 3; Kovalevskij 1956: 163, note 29; 205, note 475. In modern standard Arabic, this *alif al-wiqāya* is only used with plural verb forms, but, e.g., in the Quran it is used more widely.

11. See Gacek (2009: 8) for examples of non-straight *alif*s in Arabic manuscripts.

12. Frähn (1823: 208, 214–217) goes into minute detail about these orthographical mishaps for interested readers; Czeglédy (1951: 219–220) mentions how, e.g., water damage has led to incorrect readings in the Ibn Fadlān manuscript.

3. Arabic sources

In which Arabic sources does then *wīsū* (or *īsū*) occur? The most commonly named authors are the following (in chronological order): *Ibn Fadlān* (c. 879–960), *al-Bīrūnī* (973– fl. 1050), *al-Marwazī* (fl. 1056/57–1124/25), *al-Ghārnatī* (c. 1080–1170), *ʿAufi* (1171–1242), *Yāqūt* (1179–1229), and *al-Qazwīnī* (1203–1283).[13] Here we cannot go into detail about the lives of these men, some of whom lived more than a thousand years ago, even if we sometimes have quite detailed knowledge of their travels: we know, for example, that Ibn Fadlān left Baghdad for Volga Bulgaria, a trip which would take him nearly a year, on the 21st of June 921, and arrived there on the 14th of May 922. Below is a brief listing with the most important facts; for each author I have added an illustrative text example where the word *wīsū*/*īsū* occurs.

3.1. Ibn Fadlān (full name: Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān ibn al-ʿAbbās ibn Rāšid ibn Ḥammād; c. 879–960), was the secretary of an embassy sent by al-Muqtadir, the Caliph of Baghdad, to the Bulgars in Volga Bulgaria. After he returned, he wrote his *riḥla* or "account" of his travels; as Yāqūt (see below) refers to it as a *risāla* 'letter', it is usually known under that name. There is no information on Ibn Fadlān's return to Baghdad (or elsewhere). For nearly exactly a thousand years any knowledge we had of Ibn Fadlān's voyage was due to the extracts that Yāqūt (see below) had used in his *Muʿjam al-buldān* ('The Lexicon of Countries'), and it was only in 1923 that the Bashkir historian Ahmed Zeki Velidi Togan found an 11th century copy of part of the original manuscript of Ibd Fadlān's *risāla* (or *riḥla*) in the library of the shrine of the Imam Reza in Mashhad in Iran. The manuscript is incomplete, but we know that a description of his return to Baghdad was included in the report, as Yāqūt mentions it, though he does not use it (cf. Lunde & Stone 2012: xxxvi). Ibn Fadlān is one of only two Arab travelers to have visited Volga Bulgaria; the other is al-Ghārnatī. For a German translation see Togan 1939; for English translations see Lunde & Stone 2012, Montgomery 2014, and Montgomery 2017.

Text: "The king told me that beyond his country, three months' march away, there is a people called the Wīsū among whom the nights last less than an hour." (Lunde & Stone 2012: 33.)

See Appendix 1 for two photographs of the word *wīsū* in the original manuscript.

13. Golubeva (1973: 7) claims that the *wīsū* are mentioned in a travelogue written by Ibn Battuta (1304–1369), the famous Moroccan traveler, but I have not found this specific mention; as Janicsek (1929) has shown, Ibn Battuta's account of his visit to

3.2. Al-Bīrūnī (full name: Abū Raiḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī; 973–fl. 1050): Al-Bīrūnī, a Khwarezmian (thus not an Arab), wrote his *Taḥdīd nihāyāt al-amākin li-taṣḥīḥ masāfāt al-masākin* ('Determination of the Coordinates of Positions for the Correction of Distances between Cities') between 1018 and 1025. An English translation was made by Jamil Ali (1967); for a Russian translation, see Bulgakov 1966.

Text: "Beyond that [the Seventh Clime], the land is sparsely populated and the inhabitants live like wild beasts. The furthest region [to the north] is that of the Yūrā, whose villages can be reached from Īsu [Wīsū] in twelve days. Men travel from Bulghār in wooden sleighs and reach Īsu in twenty days." (Stone & Lunde 2012: 179.)

Compare however, another translation of the same text, but with a different transliteration:

> "The farthest community lives in the town of Yūrah which can be reached from Ayswā in twelve days, and people traveling from Bulghār in wooden sleighs reach Ayswā in twenty days." (Ali 1967: 103.)

The spelling /ayswā/ can be explained if <ويسوا> /wīsū/, with a graphical *alif*, also has an incorrect initial *alif*, as in, e.g., al-Ghārnatī (see Dubler 1953: 13, footnote 1), i.e., <ا يسو ا>; this then could be read as /*aysū/, but if one reads the final graphical *alif* as *ā* then the result is /ayswā/. If neither *alif* is read then one can read it as /īsū/.

3.3. Al-Marwazī (full name: Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir al-Marwazī; fl. 1056/57–1124/25) was born in Merv, in what is now Turkmenistan, and is the author of the *Kitāb ṭabā'iʿ al-ḥayawān al-baḥrī wa-al-barrī* ('The Book of the Nature of Animals of the Sea and of the Land'); probably written around 1020. This seems to be based at least in part on al-Jayhānī's (full name: Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Jayhānī; fl. 914–922) *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* ('The Book of Routes and Kingdoms'), which is regrettably lost (Minorsky 1942: 6; Göckenjan & Zimonyi 2001: 45–46). This, in turn, encompasses Ibn Khurradādhbih's (825–913) identically titled *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, the earliest Arabic treatise on administrative geography. It is therefore possible that a form of *wīsū* occurs in either or both of these books, but we cannot be sure until copies are found.

Bolghar is a fabrication, based on other sources, including Ibn Fadlān, so whatever form Ibn Battuta might have is anyway of no importance.

Text: "At a distance of twenty days away from them, towards the Pole, is a land called Īsu, and beyond this is a people called Yūrā; these are a savage people, living in forests, and not mixing with other men, for they fear that they may be harmed by them." (Minorsky 1942: 34.)

We cannot be sure where al-Marwazī obtained the information on the *īsū* in his book; it is certain he used al-Jayhānī's *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, which could therefore be a possible source.

3.4. Al-Ghārnatī (full name: Abū Ḥāmid Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Rahīm ibn Abī al-Rabīʾ al-Māzinī al-Qaysi al-Andalusī al-Gharnātī al-Uqlisī; c. 1080–1170) was, as his name indicates, born in Al-Andalus, and traveled widely throughout the Muslim world. He lived for over twenty years in Saqsīn, the successor city to the Khazar capital of Itil, and also visited Bolghar, some 213 years after Ibn Fadlān. After Saqsīn, he also lived for four years in Hungary, where Géza II, king of Hungary from 1141 to 1162, used al-Gharnātī to recruit Pecheneg soldiers for the Hungarian army (cf. Stone & Lunde 2012: xxvii). After moving to Baghdad in 1155 he wrote his *Al-muʿrib ʿan baʿḍ ʿajāʾib al-maghrib* ('Exposition of Some Wonders of the West'); this undated manuscript, the only one known, is kept in the Real Academia de la Historia in Madrid.

Text: "Now, these swords are exported from the lands of Islam to Bulghār with great profit for the merchants. Then the people of Bulghār take them to Wīsū, the place of the beavers, and the people of Wīsū take them to Yūrā, where they sell them for sable pelts, slave girls and young boys." (Lunde & Stone 2012: 72.)

Al-Gharnati also saw the *wīsū* and/or *yūrā*:

> "I saw a group of these people in Bulghār in the winter. They are reddish in colouring with light-blue eyes and hair like linen, almost white. They wear linen clothes, despite the cold, and some of them have cloaks of the most magnificent beaver skins, worn fur side out. They drink barley wine, as sharp as vinegar, which suits the heat of their constitutions, for they eat the flesh of beavers and squirrels, as well as honey." (Lunde & Stone 2012: 73–74; for a Spanish translation see Dubler 1953: 60–61.)

3.5. Yāqūt (full name: Yāqūt Shihāb al-Dīn ibn-ʿAbdullāh al-Rūmī al-Ḥamawī; 1179–1229). In 1219, Yāqūt, a scholar and geographer, visited Merv and Gurgānj, the capital of Khwarezm (both in present-day Turkmenistan); in one of these cities, he came across Ibn Fadlān's work (which he refers to as

the *risāla* 'letter' or 'report'), and used parts of it in his geographical dictionary *Mu'jam al-buldān* ('The Lexicon of Countries'). Yāqūt's importance lies in the fact that many later writers used his material, and before Togan found Ibn Fadlān's manuscript in 1923 it was only known from extracts under various headings in Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-buldān*. The Mashhad manuscript has about 45 pages worth of material which are not in Yāqūt. However, not all the material ascribed to Ibn Fadlān in Yāqūt in fact also derives from Ibn Fadlān; Yāqūt has obviously used material about, e.g., the Khazars from other sources (including from the Persian geographer Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Fārisī al-Iṣṭakhrī al-Karkhī, fl. 957) and then conflated them. It was not until Frähn published the abovementioned book in 1823 that the sections in Yāqūt which originated in Ibn Fadlān's *riḥla* were finally reconstructed. Frähn also pointed out that Ibn Fadlān's report was important for Russian history, as it predates the Russian Primary Chronicle by nearly two hundred years (cf. also Lunde & Stone 2012: xxxiv–xxxv).

Text: "Der König der Bulgharen habe ihm erzählt, dass hinter seinem Lande in einer Entfernung von drei Monate Wegs ein Volk, Namens Wischu, sich befinde, bei dem die Nächte (im Sommer) nicht einmal einer Stunde Länge hätten." (Frähn 1823: 207.)

Cf. Ibn Fadlān's text sample, and the form <Wischu>, which we explained above.

3.7. 'Aufi (full name: Sadīd ud-Dīn Muhammad ibn Muhammad 'Aufī Bukhārī; 1171–1242), a Persian historian, was born in Bukhara, in the Khwarezmian Empire (in present-day Uzbekistan), and wrote his informatively titled *Jawāmi ul-hikāyāt wa lawāmi' ul-riwāyāt* ('Collections of Stories and Illustrations of Histories'), a mix of anecdotes, historical accounts and geographical descriptions, some time before 1232; it is partially based on Ibn Fadlān's *riḥla* (Markwart 1924: 262). Only extracts of the manuscript, some 2 500 pages long, have yet been published.

Text: "Zwanzig Tagereisen von ihrem Lande liegt eine Stadt (Landschaft), die man *Īsū* [*Vesъ*] nennt, und jenseits von Īsū (nach dem Nordpol zu) ist ein Volk, die man *Jūrā* nennt. Sie sind eine wilde Schar. Sie verkehren nicht mit den Menschen und fürchten sich vor ihrer Bosheit." (Markwart 1924: 288–289.)

The similarity with al-Marwazī's text is obvious, as also pointed out by Göckenjan & Zimonyi (2001: 47).

3.8. Zakariya al-Qazwīnī (full name: Abū Yaḥyā Zakariyyā' ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Qazwīnī; c. 1203–1283) was a Persian cosmographer, who compiled the *ʿAjā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt* ('The Wonders of Creatures and the Marvels of Creation').

Text: "Er erzählt (ferner), daß die Einwohner von Bulgār Schwerter aus den Ländern des Islams nach *Wīsū* bringen; das sind Schwerter, an welchen keine Griffe noch Zieraten hergestellt sind, sondern sie langen an, wie sie aus dem Feuer herauskommen, und werden in Wasser getaucht und gehärtet, so daß, wenn man (die Klingen) an einem Faden aufhängt und mit dem Finger an sie schnellt, sie ein Klingen hören lassen." (Markwart 1924: 300.)

The similarity of some of these illustrative text samples show that certain authors borrowed from others: thus, e.g., ʿAufi borrowed from al-Marwazī, and other text sections show al-Marwazī probably borrowed from al-Bīrūnī (cf. Kennedy 1973: 76), and al-Bīrūnī borrowed from al-Jayhānī (cf. Göckenjan & Zimonyi 2001: 18), and Yāqūt, who refers to *wīsū* in his *Muʿjam al-buldān*, copied the Ibn Fadlān text directly from (a copy of) his manuscript (cf. Ritter 1942: 103), and not from al-Bīrūnī or al-Marwazī, as they have *īsū* in their texts, and not *wīsū*. In addition, the role of non-extant manuscripts also has to be taken into account: e.g., al-Marwazī, but also other, for our purposes irrelevant, authors such as Ibn Rustah, Gardizi, and the anonymous author of the *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, all used al-Jayhānī's *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik* ('The Book of Routes and Kingdoms'), of which so far no copy has been found. We know that Ibn Fadlān visited al-Jayhānī (Togan 1939: 6; Lunde & Stone 2012: xix, 5) in Bukhara on his way to Bolghar, and he may have visited him again on the journey back, or kept in touch with him otherwise (cf. Minorsky 1942: 7), so *wīsū* may also occur in al-Jayhānī. A more comprehensive stemmatological study is necessary to uncover in more detail who borrowed from whom (see Göckenjan & Zimonyi 2001: 49 for a first attempt with regard to al-Jayhānī). Here we can only give the following very rough sketch (Figure 1), where it is likely, taking into account the Arab historiographical tradition of the time, that each writer availed themselves of all existing material, without necessarily crediting their sources:

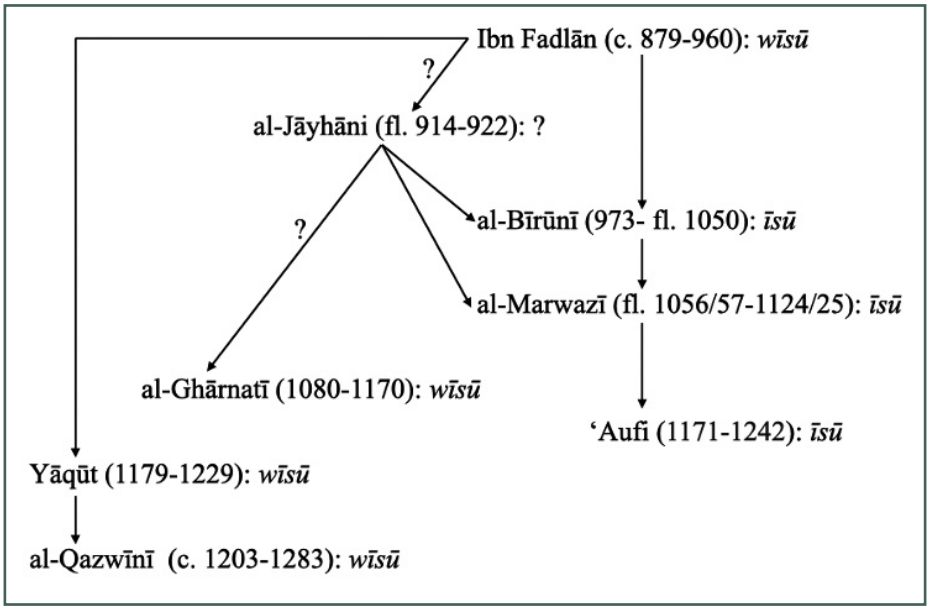

Figure 1: *wīsū* and *īsū* in Arabic sources

4. Conclusion

What have we discovered? Nothing much, really. Hopefully the background given here will have shed more light on the question (already answered by Minorsky in 1942) of why the thousand-year-old Arabic word for (probably) the Veps occurs in two variants, namely *wīsū* and *īsū*, and why there is such a variety of misspellings in European sources (already answered by Frähn in 1823).

Reasons of space prevent me from delving deeply into the connections between Arabic *wīsū*, Old Russian *Vesь*, Latin *Wizzi* and *Visinnus* as well as from which language the Arabic form has been borrowed. Though much of the trade between the Rus' and Arabs took place via middlemen, there is ample proof of direct contact between them (see, e.g., Hraundal 2013), so a direct borrowing of *wīsū* from Old East Slavic is not inconceivable; the *p*-lessness of the Arabic could easily be explained by an Old East Slavic *ves'*. How a putative **vepsä* would have been borrowed into Turkic is unsure, but it is unlikely the consonant cluster *ps* would not have undergone any change when borrowed into a Turkic language (cf. Clauson 1962: 169; Erdal 2004: 105–113). The topic of how exactly *wīsū* made its way into Arabic, therefore, certainly merits further study.

Additionally, it is perhaps worth taking another look at the brief sections in these treatises where the *wīsū* are referred to, as there is more about them than mere mentions of their ethnonym. For example, questions concerning possible early writing systems used by a Uralic people are always of special interest, and so Ibn Fadlān's description of the Bulgar king writing to the *wīsū* is not uninteresting: "So I had him [a giant; RB] brought to my residence and wrote to the inhabitants of Wīsū, three months distant, asking them for information. They wrote back ..." (Montgomery 2017: 29). Many researchers have, though admitting the somewhat fairytale-like aspect of the story, assumed that maybe there were among the *wīsū* at least some who were conversant with the art of writing (thus, e.g., Frähn 1832: 540; Lunde & Stone 2012: 228). Markwart (1924: 318) assumes that Ibn Fadlān is exaggerating here and takes him to task: "Da die Būlgaren mit den Wīsū nur durch stummen Tauschhandel verkehren konnten [...], so ist dies eine unverschämte Aufschneiderei des Gottesmannes." Togan (1939: 193–196) counters that even if silent trade occurred between the Bulgars and the *wīsū*, this does not necessarily imply there could not have been anybody with some knowledge of writing, and assumes the correspondence must have been in the Old Turkic script. Haavio (1965: 81–92) dedicates a whole chapter of his engrossing *Bjarmien vallan kukoistus ja tuho* ('The rise and fall of Biarmia') to the question and suggests that the *wīsū* may have used *abur*, i.e., the Komi alphabet created by Stephen of Perm (as suggested by Räsänen 1946), or Arabic. The *wīsū* and Turks may have used middlemen who had some knowledge of writing.

As mentioned above, and as shown in the text samples (al-Bīrūnī, al-Marwazī, al-Gharnātī, 'Aufī), the *yūrā* are also often mentioned in the texts (the *yūrā* living to the north, the east or the northeast of the *wīsū*). Here too it would be worth taking, once again, a closer look at what exactly our authors say about the connections between the *yūrā* and the *wīsū*.

The present paper perhaps asks more questions than it has managed to answer, but we would like to underscore that a more thorough search through Arabic (and Persian) sources from the zenith of Muslim geographical writing on the "icy heart of the Eurasian landmass", as Tim Mackintosh-Smith (2014: ix) puts it, might be a worthwhile endeavor, which is almost certain to throw at least a tiny bit more light on the history of the Veps (and other Uralic peoples).

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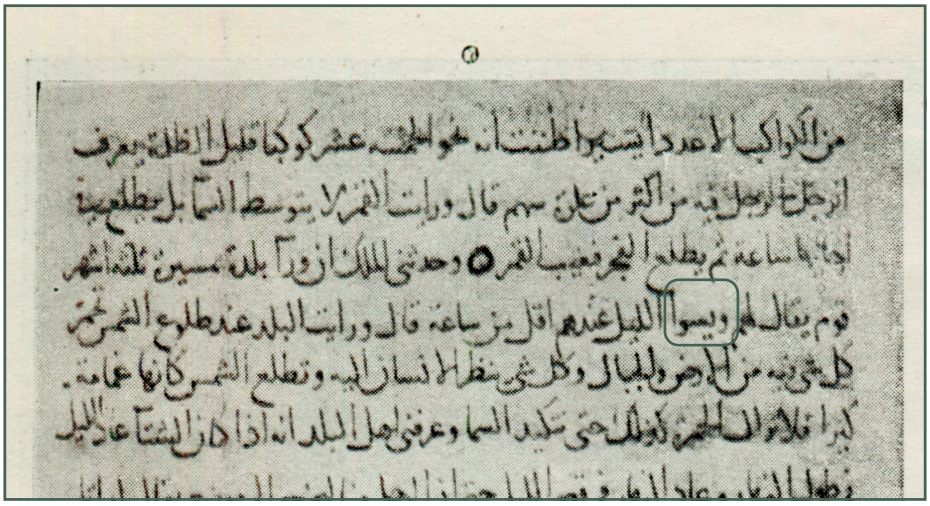
Appendix 1: *wīsū* in the 11th century copy of Ibn Fadlān's manuscript, discovered by Togan in 1923 in Mashhad, Iran


326 Приложение

من الكواكب الا عددا يسيرا ظننت انه نحو الخمسة عشر كوكبا قليل الظلمة يعرف
الرجل الرجل فيه من اكثر من على سهم قال ورايت القمر لا يتوسط السما بل يطلع فيه
اجابها ساعة ثم يطلع الفجر فيغيب القمر ٥ وحدثني الملك ان ورد البلد بعسين ثلثة اشهر
قوم يقال لهم ويسوا الليل عندهم اقل من ساعة قال ورايت البلد عند طلوع الشمس تحمر
كل شيء فيه من الارض والجبال وكل شيء ينظر الانسان اليه وتطلع الشمس كانها عمامة
كبيرا فلا تزال الحمرة كذلك حتى تتبدد السما وعرفني اهل البلد انه اذا كان الشتا عاد الليل

(Kovalevskij 1956: 326; the same photograph is found in Kračkovskij 1939: 206a.)


٥
من الكواكب الا عددا يسيرا ظننت انه نحو الخمسة عشر كوكبا قليل الظلمة يعرف
الرجل الرجل فيه من اكثر من على سهم قال ورايت القمر لا يتوسط السما بل يطلع فيه
اجابها ساعة ثم يطلع الفجر فيغيب القمر ٥ وحدثني الملك ان ورد البلد بعسين ثلثة اشهر
قوم يقال لهم ويسوا الليل عندهم اقل من ساعة قال ورايت البلد عند طلوع الشمس تحمر
كل شيء فيه من الارض والجبال وكل شيء ينظر الانسان اليه وتطلع الشمس كانها عمامة
كبيرا فلا تزال الحمرة كذلك حتى تتبدد السما وعرفني اهل البلد انه اذا كان الشتا عاد الليل

(Czeglédy 1951: 254; Lajos Ligeti had the photograph taken in 1936; cf. Czeglédy 1951: 218.)