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Arab Silver Redistribution Networks in the Early Medieval Eastern Europe: Polycentric Connections and Entangled Hierarchies

One of the most fascinating phenomena in the early Middle Age history of western Eurasia was the interaction between the Islamic world and Eastern Europe (under this term we understand European Russia, Baltic countries, Poland, Eastern Germany and Scandinavia). Arab sources, archaeological evidence and the numerous hoards with silver coins (dirhams) and so-called hacksilver (silver pieces) emphasize the importance and the intensity of these contacts. Oriental silver flowed into Eastern Europe from the early 9th to the early 11th century and was redistributed by networks of merchants, chieftains or kings and craftsmen supplying Asian markets above all with slaves and furs. This trade between a sophisticated Islamic world and the “barbarians” reflects polycentric interactions in western Eurasian. On the other hand, the commerce between the caliphate and the societies in Eastern European coincided with the state building there. The connections between both processes were very close. Revenue needed to build early states was being produced not only locally within the society. In addition, tribute, loot, monopolization of silver flows and control of long-distance trade were crucial. Precious metals and luxury goods played a central role for the new elites, necessary for their prestige as “symbolic capital”. In this context we can talk about a spatial center-periphery-hierarchy which evolved between elites “organizing” the state and tribes paying tributes in furs or delivering slaves which all could be exchanged for silver.