#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHAEL CRICHTON

EATERS OF THE DEAD

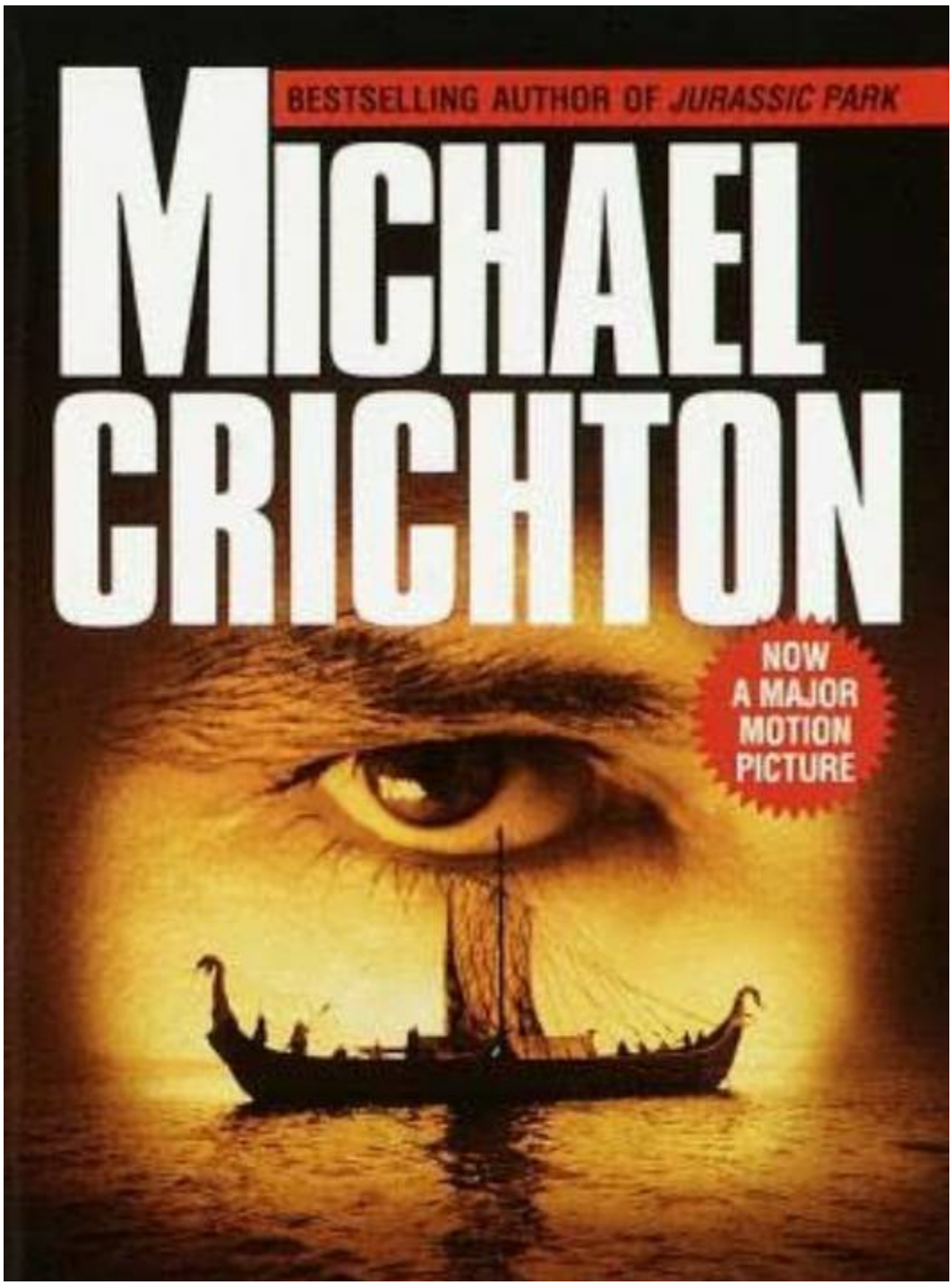
"A GREAT STORY." *Denver Post*

DON'T MISS CRICHTON'S NEWEST BESTSELLER, NEXT

(Previously published as *The 13th Warrior*)

EATERS OF THE DEAD – “The 13th Warrior”

MICHAEL CRICHTON



To William Howells

"Praise not the day until evening has come; a woman until she is burnt; a sword until it is tried; a maiden until she is married; ice until it has been crossed; beer until it has been drunk."

—VIKING PROVERB

"Evil is of old date."

—ARAB PROVERB

INTRODUCTION

THE IBN FADLAN MANUSCRIPT REPRESENTS THE earliest known eyewitness account of Viking life and society. It is an extraordinary document, describing in vivid detail events which occurred more than a thousand years ago. The manuscript has not, of course, survived intact over that enormous span of time. It has a peculiar history of its own, and one no less remarkable than the text itself.

PROVENANCE OF THE MANUSCRIPT

In June, A.D. 921, the Caliph of Bagdad sent a member of his court, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, as ambassador to the King of the Bulgars. Ibn Fadlan was gone three years on his journey and never actually accomplished his mission, for

along the way he encountered a company of Norsemen and had many adventures among them.

When he finally returned to Bagdad, Ibn Fadlan recorded his experiences in the form of an official report to the court. That original manuscript has long since disappeared, and to reconstruct it we must rely on partial fragments preserved in later sources.

The best-known of these is an Arabic geographical lexicon written by Yakut ibn-Abdallah sometime in the thirteenth century. Yakut includes a dozen verbatim passages from Ibn Fadlan's account, which was then three hundred years old. One must presume Yakut worked from a copy of the original. Nevertheless these few paragraphs have been endlessly translated and retranslated by later scholars.

Another fragment was discovered in Russia in 1817 and was published in German by the St. Petersburg Academy in 1823. This material includes certain passages previously published by J. L. Rasmussen in 1814. Rasmussen worked from a manuscript he found in Copenhagen, since lost, and of dubious origins. There were also Swedish, French, and English translations at this time, but they are all notoriously inaccurate and apparently do not include any new material.

In 1878, two new manuscripts were discovered in the private antiquities collection of Sir John Emerson, the British Ambassador in Constantinople. Sir John was apparently one of those avid collectors whose zeal for acquisition exceeded his interest in the particular item acquired. The manuscripts were found after his death; no one knows where he obtained them, or when.

One is a geography in Arabic by Ahmad Tusi, reliably dated at A.D. 1047. This makes the Tusi manuscript chronologically closer than any other to the original of Ibn Fadlan, which was presumably written around A.D. 924-926. Yet scholars regard the Tusi manuscript as the least trustworthy of all the sources; the text is full of obvious errors and internal inconsistencies,

and although it quotes at length from one "Ibn Faqih" who visited the North country, many authorities hesitate to accept this material.

The second manuscript is that of Amin Razi, dating roughly from A.D. 1585-1595. It is written in Latin and according to its author is translated directly from the Arabic text of Ibn Fadlan. The Razi manuscript contains some material about the Oguz Turks, and several passages concerning battles with the mist monsters, not found in other sources.

In 1934, a final text in Medieval Latin was found in the monastery of Xymos, near Thessalonika in northeastern Greece. The Xymos manuscript contains further commentary on Ibn Fadlan's relations with the Caliph, and his experiences with the creatures of the North country. The author and date of the Xymos manuscript are both uncertain.

The task of collating these many versions and translations, ranging over more than a thousand years, appearing in Arabic, Latin, German, French, Danish, Swedish, and English, is an undertaking of formidable proportions. Only a person of great erudition and energy would attempt it, and in 1951 such a person did. Per Fraus-Dolos, Professor emeritus of Comparative literature at the University of Oslo, Norway, compiled all the known sources and began the massive task of translation which occupied him until his death in 1957. Portions of his new translation were published in the Proceedings of the National Museum of Oslo: 1959-1960, but they did not arouse much scholarly interest, perhaps because the journal has a limited circulation.

The Fraus-Dolos translation was absolutely literal; in his own introduction to the material, Fraus-Dolos remarked that "it is in the nature of languages that a pretty translation is not accurate, and an accurate translation finds its own beauty without help."

In preparing this full and annotated version of the Fraus-Dolos translation, I have made few alterations. I deleted some repetitive passages; these are indicated in the text. I changed paragraph structure, starting each directly quoted speaker with a new paragraph, according to modern convention. I

have omitted the diacritical marks on Arabic names. Finally, I have occasionally altered the original syntax, usually by transposing subordinate clauses so that the meaning is more readily grasped.

THE VIKINGS

Ibn Fadlan's portrait of the Vikings differs markedly from the traditional European view of these people. The first European descriptions of the Vikings were recorded by the clergy; they were the only observers of the time who could write, and they viewed the pagan Northmen with special horror. Here is a typically hyperbolic passage, cited by D. M. Wilson, from a twelfth-century Irish writer:

> In a word, although there were an hundred hard-steeled iron heads on one neck, and an hundred sharp, ready, cool, never rusting, brazen tongues in each head, and an hundred garrulous, loud, unceasing voices from each tongue, they could not recount or narrate, enumerate or tell, what all the Irish suffered in common, both men and women, laity and clergy, old and young, noble and ignoble, of the hardships and of injuring and of oppression, in every house, from those valiant, wrathful, purely pagan people.

Modern scholars recognize that such bloodcurdling accounts of Viking raids are vastly exaggerated. Yet European writers still tend to dismiss the Scandinavians as bloody barbarians, irrelevant to the main flow of Western culture and ideas. Often this has been done at the expense of a certain logic. For example, David Talbot Rice writes:

> From the eighth to the eleventh centuries indeed the role of the Vikings was perhaps more influential than that of any other single ethnic group in Western Europe. ... The Vikings were thus great travellers and they

performed outstanding feats of navigation; their cities were great centres of trade; their art was original, creative and influential; they boasted a fine literature and a developed culture. Was it truly a civilization? It must, I think, be admitted that it was not. ... The touch of humanism which is the hallmark of civilization was absent.

This same attitude is reflected in the opinion of Lord Clark:

When one considers the Icelandic sagas, which are among the great books of the world, one must admit that the Norsemen produced a culture. But was it civilization? ... Civilization means something more than energy and will and creative power: something the early Norsemen hadn't got, but which, even in their time, was beginning to reappear in Western Europe. How can I define it.? Well, very shortly, a sense of permanence. The wanderers and invaders were in a continual state of flux. They didn't feel the need to look forward beyond the next March or the next voyage or the next battle. And for that reason it didn't occur to them to build stone houses, or to write books.

The more carefully one reads these views, the more illogical they appear. Indeed, one must wonder why highly educated and intelligent European scholars feel so free to dismiss the Vikings with no more than a passing nod. And why the preoccupation with the semantic question of whether the Vikings had a "civilization"? The situation is explicable only if one recognizes a long-standing European bias, springing from traditional views of European prehistory.

Every Western schoolchild is dutifully taught that the Near East is "the cradle of civilization," and that the first civilizations arose in Egypt and Mesopotamia, nourished by the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates river basins.

From here civilization spread to Crete and Greece, and then to Rome, and eventually to the barbarians of northern Europe.

What these barbarians were doing while they waited for the arrival of civilization was not known; nor was the question often raised. The emphasis lay on the process of dissemination, which the late Gordon Childe summarized as "the irradiation of European barbarism by Oriental civilization." Modern scholars held this view, as did Roman and Greek scholars before them. Geoffrey Bibby says: "The history of northern and eastern Europe is viewed from the West and South, with all the preconceptions of men who considered themselves civilized looking upon men whom they considered barbarians."

From this standpoint, the Scandinavians are obviously the farthest from the source of civilization, and logically the last to acquire it; and therefore they are properly regarded as the last of the barbarians, a nagging thorn in the side of those other European areas trying to absorb the wisdom and civilization of the East.

The trouble is that this traditional view of European prehistory has been largely destroyed in the last fifteen years. The development of accurate carbon-dating techniques has made a mess of the old chronology, which supported the old views of diffusion. It now appears indisputable that Europeans were erecting huge megalithic tombs before the Egyptians built the pyramids; Stonehenge is older than the civilization of Mycenaean Greece; metallurgy in Europe may well precede the development of metalworking skills in Greece and Troy.

The meaning of these discoveries has not yet been sorted out, but it is certainly now impossible to regard the prehistoric Europeans as savages idly awaiting the blessings of Eastern civilization. On the contrary, the Europeans seem to have had organizational skills considerable enough to work massive stones, and they seem also to have had impressive astronomical knowledge to build Stonehenge, the first observatory in the world.

Thus, the European bias toward the civilized East must be called into question, and indeed the very concept of "European barbarism" requires a fresh look. With this in mind, those barbaric remnants, the Vikings, take on a new significance, and we can reexamine what is known of the Scandinavians of the tenth century.

First we should recognize that "the Vikings were never a clearly unified group. What the Europeans saw were scattered and individual parties of seafarers who came from a vast geographical area—Scandinavia is larger than Portugal, Spain, and France combined—and who sailed from their individual feudal states for the purpose of trade or piracy or both; the Vikings made little distinction. But that is a tendency shared by many seafarers from the Greeks to the Elizabethans.

In fact, for a people who lacked civilization, who "didn't feel the need to look ... beyond the next battle," the Vikings demonstrate remarkably sustained and purposeful behavior. As proof of widespread trading, Arabic coins appear in Scandinavia as early as A.D. 692. During the next four hundred years, the Viking trader-pirates expanded as far west as Newfoundland, as far south as Sicily and Greece (where they left carvings on the lions of Delos), and as far east as the Ural Mountains of Russia, where their traders linked up with caravans arriving from the silk route to China. The Vikings were not empire builders, and it is popular to say that their influence across this vast area was impermanent. Yet it was sufficiently permanent to lend placenames to many localities in England, while to Russia they gave the very name of the nation itself, from the Norse tribe Rus. As for the more subtle influence of their pagan vigor, relentless energy, and system of values, the manuscript of Ibn Fadlan shows us how many typically Norse attitudes have been retained . to the present day. Indeed, there is something strikingly familiar to the modern sensibility about the Viking way of life, and something profoundly appealing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A word should be said about Ibn Fadlan, the man who speaks to us with such a distinctive voice despite the passage of more than a thousand years

and the filter of transcribers and translators from a dozen linguistic and cultural traditions.

We know almost nothing of him personally. Apparently he was educated and, from his exploits, he could not have been very old. He states explicitly that he was a familiar of the Caliph, whom he did not particularly admire. (In this he was not alone, for the Caliph al-Muqtadir was twice deposed and finally slain by one of his own officers.)

Of his society, we know more. In the tenth century, Bagdad, the City of Peace, was the most civilized city on earth. More than a million inhabitants lived within its famous circular walls. Bagdad was the focus of intellectual and commercial excitement, within an environment of extraordinary grace, elegance, and splendor. There were perfumed gardens, cool shady arbors, and the accumulated riches of a vast empire.

The Arabs of Bagdad were Muslim and fiercely dedicated to that religion. But they were also exposed to peoples who looked, acted, and believed differently from them. The Arabs were, in fact, the least provincial people in the world of that time, and this made them superb observers of foreign cultures.

Ibn Fadlan himself is clearly an intelligent and observant man. He is interested in both the everyday details of life and the beliefs of the people he meets. Much that he witnessed struck him as vulgar, obscene, and barbaric, but he wastes little time in indignation; once he expresses his disapproval, he goes right back to his unblinking observations. And he reports what he sees with remarkably little condescension.

His manner of reporting may seem eccentric to Western sensibilities; he does not tell a story as we are accustomed to hearing one. We tend to forget that our own sense of drama originates in an oral tradition—a live performance by a bard before an audience that must often have been restless and impatient, or else sleepy after a heavy meal. Our oldest stories, the Iliad, Beowulf, the Song of Roland, were all intended to be sung by singers whose chief function and first obligation was entertainment.