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Adapting Ibn Fadlan: Cultural Poetics in Modern Narratives

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Abstract

This paper delves into the socio-historical contexts of Ibn Fadlan's manuscript and its subsequent adaptations in the 20th and 21st centuries, employing Greenblatt's concept of cultural poetics. By examining Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* (1976), McTernan's *The 13th Warrior* (1999), and Anzour's *Saqf Al-Alam* (2007), we aim to uncover the transformative processes the manuscript and the character of Ibn Fadlan have undergone across different periods and cultures. Each adaptation is analyzed within its specific cultural and social backdrop, revealing how it reflects the historical and social realities of its time. This study illustrates how Ibn Fadlan's manuscript serves as a palimpsest, continually rewritten to fit the socio-historical contexts of each era. Through these adaptations, we explore the dynamic interplay between culture, history, and narrative, demonstrating how stories evolve while retaining their core essence. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the enduring relevance of Ibn Fadlan's experiences, demonstrating how they resonate across time and space, shaping and reshaping cultural identities in an ever-changing world.

Keywords: Adaption, Cultural poetic, Ibn Fadlan, Travelogue, Mobility

Introduction

Ibn Fadlan's character and narrative have been subject to various adaptations and indigenizations across different cultural contexts, attracting broad interest. Each adaptation presents a unique portrayal of Ibn Fadlan, leading to significant differences among interpretations. scholarly analyses of these adaptations demonstrate a wide range of perspectives and methodologies, highlighting the diverse approaches to understanding his character and narrative. This variety in representation and academic interpretation emphasizes the complex, multifaceted nature of Ibn Fadlan's character and story, illustrating the challenges and intricacies of cross-cultural adaptation and reception, impeded in Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* (1976), McTernan's *The 13th Warrior* (1999), and Anzour's *Saqf Al-Alam* (2007).



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To understand the significance of Ibn Fadlan's travelogue, it is essential to explore its historical and cultural context. The Abbasid Era (750-1258 CE), during which Ibn Fadlan lived, was a period of significant cultural and literary accomplishments. This era witnessed a vibrant exchange of ideas and traditions between Arabic culture and other civilizations, fostering a rich and diverse literary landscape. This paper delves into the genre of travelogues, specifically Ibn Fadlan's work. A summary of the three main parts of the manuscript is provided, emphasizing the role of travelers and Ibn Fadlan's contribution to the cultural exchange of the time.

The 20th century witnessed a period of significant geopolitical shifts and conflicts, particularly between the West and East. The decline of Arab power due to wars and invasions, coupled with Europe's diminished influence following World War I and II, led to a new global power dynamic. America's emergence as a dominant force significantly shaped global politics and intensified existing conflicts. To analyze the adaptations of Ibn Fadlan's manuscript within this historical context, this paper employs a theoretical framework that emphasizes the negotiation between aesthetic texts and social, cultural, and historical contexts. Greenblatt's key concepts of New Historicism, including cultural poetics, resonance and wonder, and cultural mobility and social energy, are introduced to provide a lens through which we examine these adaptations. The final section of the paper, applies Greenblatt's wide concept of cultural poetics to elements of the adaptations, including the context of the adaptations, literary and cinematic depictions, and the divergent opening of each of the adaptations. Cultural poetics examines how historical materials transform into aesthetic properties, while resonance and wonder highlight the emotional power of literature to connect with broader cultural dynamics. This research merges context with text, emphasizing how socio-historical factors are reflected in the adaptations. It concludes by revealing the intricate connections between the past and present, and demonstrating how cultural artifacts both mirror and influence modern perceptions.

The Abbasid Era (750-1258 CE)

This section contextualizes Ibn Fadlan's manuscript in its 10th-century Abbasid era in the Islamic nation. The first part is the socio-historical setting in the Abbasid Caliphate the time of Ibn Fadlan's voyage, then this part moves to the era's travelogues. The final subsection is dedicated to Ibn Fadlan's travelogue.

The Abbasid Caliphate: A Nexus of Culture and Literature

The Abbasid Caliphate is one of the most prominent Islamic caliphates. It is the third caliphate that ruled the Islamic nation after overthrowing the Umayyads. They moved the capital of the Islamic nation from Damascus to Baghdad, which flourished significantly during that period. The Abbasid state was vast, consisting of fourteen regions—six Arab regions and eight non-Arab regions. Persians played a crucial role in establishing the Abbasid state and participated in the conflict with the Umayyads (Abu Talib, 2013, p. 31). The Abbasid Caliphate differed in structure, culture, and traditions from previous caliphates. During the Umayyad era, the Arabs



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held tightly to their tribalism and distinguished the Arabs from the Mawali¹, which referred to non-Arab Muslims such as Turks, Africans, and Persians (Hassan, 1994, p. 13).

The Abbasid Caliphate did the opposite, benefiting from the Mawali to overthrow the Umayyads. Persians gained prominent positions as ministers and army leaders because they were most beneficial in this revolution (Abu Talib, 2013, p. 38). The acceptance of the Mawali led to a period of harmony, but due to the large areas and cultural differences, many regions decided to become independent from the Abbasid Caliphate and create independent states; Despite the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate, all regions remained under the Islamic nation, and many areas, like Baghdad, enjoyed prosperity (Bitar, 1997, p. 277).

Cultural life in the Abbasid era was distinguished by its comprehensiveness and urbanization, reaching its peak in the first Abbasid era (750-847). The Abbasid state was an inspiration for knowledge and a center of attraction for other civilizations and cultures from all countries, significantly developing and supporting the cultural movement. This change in the structure of the Islamic community is reflected in Abbasid literature, especially poetry, which reflected the mixture of Arabic culture with a broader Islamic culture (Nicholson, 1907, p. 291).

The second (847-946) and third (946-1055) eras marked the beginning of the decline. For example, the Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtadir, could not control the states, causing political, economic, and social decline, as some wars broke out between the states. However, this political deterioration was accompanied by literary prosperity and intellectual growth. The fourth era (1055-1258) was the era of decay when the Caliph had no influence left, the Crusades took place, and it ended with the fall of Baghdad (Hassan, 1994, p. 10-12).

The Abbasid era is divided into several periods, but when it comes to literature, it is an integrated era in which literature flourished and diversified due to the diversity of cultures. Especially in the capital, Baghdad, Arabic culture was mixed with Persian, Turkish, Syriac, Roman, and Berber elements, contributing to the formation of the state; This cultural mixture contributed to the development and revitalization of literature in all its genres (Rashid, 1989, p. 15). In addition to these different cultures and mixtures, Arabic culture was affected by the translation of Western books and science. Poetry dominated the cultural products of this period, but prose also developed significantly. Travelogues, which are discussed in the next subsection, have increasingly attracted attention and sparked growing interest among audiences.

The Explorer's Caliphate: Abbasid Travelogues

The extension of the caliphate to distant regions increased travel for various motives: religious, economic, or social. While most trips were voluntary and individual, some were commissioned for official missions, including the need to collect information and data about the countries that Islam had reached (Faheem, 1989, pp. 80-82). Travelers gained a prominent position in society,



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and the caliphate rewarded them; The travelers' knowledge about other cultures and unfamiliar traditions attracted people eager to hear the news of others; People gathered around travelers to enjoy their observations from faraway lands, their customs, ruling circles, scientific knowledge, and strange experiences they encountered (Walee, 2018, pp. 369-373).

Cultural curiosity led to the emergence of travelogues as a prominent genre in the Abbasid era. People enjoyed them because of the information they contained about distant countries. However, travelogues were not always accurate or scientific, as they often included myths and exaggerations that were palatable in society (Abu Talib, 2013, p. 199). Travelogues combined different components in one text, such as autobiography, story, history, and geography; this diversity earned them value as they contributed to the bonds of acquaintance and rapprochement between nations through cultural and social exchange (Walee, 2018, p. 376).

Travelers differed in their observations and ability to confront and explain strange phenomena. They also varied in their degree of interest in accurate description and their understanding of bizarre events under changing circumstances (Hussain, 1983, pp. 6-8).

In the course of this period, the mentality of the Muslim traveler was molded by political as well as cultural dominance; such travelers, embodying the culture of the conqueror and the ruler, established religious, ethnic, and cultural criteria as standards for evaluating various phenomena and for assessing behaviors and beliefs, favoring Islamic culture over others (Faheem, 1989, pp. 174-175). Travelers' experiences in cultured Baghdad and its lavish lifestyle caused them to reject and criticize the conditions of other kingdoms, especially those in the north. As a result, they unusually depicted these locations, leading readers to note that travelers viewed them with astonishment (Al-Dahan, 1991, p. 22). This astonishment is evident in Ibn Fadlan's text, which is presented next.

Ibn Fadlan's Voyage: An Abbasid Ambassador's Adventures Across Cultures

Ahmad bn Fadlan bn Abbas bn Rashid bn Hammad is a Mawla of Caliph al-Muqtadir. The roots of Ibn Fadlan remain ambiguous, lacking details on his personal life and standing before his expedition to the Volga River. Critics claim that the name Fadlan is not Arabic and suggest that he might be a Persian Mawla¹ due to the close ties between Persians and the Abbasid Caliphate (Al-Dahan, 1991, pp. 37-39). Ibn Fadlan is absent from the historical or geographical texts of this era, which succeeded the Dark Ages (1258–1453) and the fall of Baghdad (1258), a time when the Mongols burned Baghdad's library and discarded all of its books into the Euphrates River. Yaqut Al-Hamawi's (1866) *Dictionary of Countries* is the first to refer to Ibn Fadlan's manuscript, providing a critical evaluation and criticizing Ibn Fadlan for his imagination (Al-Hamawi, 1866, pp. 480-488).

The Mashhad manuscript of Ibn Fadlan (1924) is almost complete manuscript, missing only

^۱مولی singular of Mawali



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two pages. Since its discovery, several critics have tried to compile the document in other languages, including Arabic. The text indicates that the King of the Bulgars converted to Islam and declared his loyalty to the Caliph. He requested Caliph Al-Muqtadir to dispatch someone to instruct them in the Islamic conviction, assist in building a mosque and minbar¹, and request funds to build a fort for protection (Montgomery, 2017, p. 9). Ahmad bn Fadlan was deputized to read Al-Muqtadir's letter to the King of Bulgars, deliver gifts, and supervise the legal experts and instructors (Ibn Fadlan, 2017, p. 3). Ibn Fadlan was accompanied by three main representatives: Sawsan Al-Rassi, Takin Al-Turki, Bars al-Şaqlabi, and others, including legal experts, instructors, and servants (Al-Dahan, 1991, pp. 23-24).

The travelogue consists of four sections. The initial section outlines the beginning of the journey from Baghdad on June 21, 921, crossing through Iran and Turkey. It specifies the regions encountered, the customs and traditions observed, and the duration of their visits in each location. He describes the manners of the Khwarazm people, stating, "They are the strangest of people in the way they talk and behave. When they talk, they sound just like starlings calling" (Ibn Fadlan, 2017, p. 7). Ibn Fadlan details everything from an Islamic point of view, showing his devotion to his religion. He mentions the impression people had when he read the Quran to them, even though they were non-Muslims, their marriage customs, their rejection of pederasty, and their funeral rituals (4-18). The second part focuses on the Saqaliba Bulgars, people who he was sent to. The king welcomed them and, and payed them respect. A few days later, they gathered to read Al-Muqtadir's letter with instructions to the king. Ibn Fadlan describes how he instructed the king not to call himself a king on the minbar because "God is the king, and He alone is to be accorded this title from the minbar" (18-32).

In the third part, he describes the Rusiyyah (Russians) he met, his observations were very specific for example he describes their physical shape as tall as a palm tree and "They are the filthiest of all God's creatures" and their funeral rites. The last part, the shortest, describes the customs of the Khazars and the life of their king (32-90). Through his detailed descriptions, Ibn Fadlan provides vivid pictures of the countries he passed through. The details of his return to Baghdad are unknown. He wrote his travelogue after his return to Baghdad (May 11, 922), demonstrating his steadfast adherence to Islamic religion and tradition throughout his journey.

A World Transformed: The Hegemony Conflict

The period known as the Dark Ages (1258–1453) came after the Islamic Golden Age (750–1258). It started with the fall of Baghdad and was marked by the decline of Islamic territories. Later, America emerged as a superpower, leading to intensified conflicts as a consequence of these global power shifts. The first part discusses the shifts in global power, while the second part highlights the disruption in the power dynamic and conflicts that resulted from this change.

The Shifting Sands of Power: Historical Transformations

The decline of the Arabs was due to several reasons, including the Crusades (1096-1291) and



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the Mongol invasion (1258), followed by subsequent events in the following centuries. The Europeans conducted the Crusades, which included two traditions: a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and pious violence (Gaposchkin, 2013, p. 44). The Crusaders retained control of the Holy City after forty days of siege, killing men, women, and children. After two days, no Muslims remained within the city walls, and the fate of the Jews was similar to that of the Muslims (Maalouf, 1989, p. 12). The Muslims defined the Crusades as “a Mediterranean-wide surge of the Latin West against Islamic powers” a kind of Jihad motivated by a desire to recover lands lost to Islam earlier (Chevedden, 2011, pp. 187-188). The long wars and people’s preoccupation with survival led to a decline in scientific and cultural advancement.

The unity of Arab countries ended with the fall of Baghdad due to the Mongol invasion. This invasion is considered one of the most influential and bloody events in the history of the Islamic world. The Mongols attacked Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, which was one of the most important cultural and scientific centers in the Islamic world (Natour, 1991, p. 11). The Mongols overran Baghdad, destroyed mosques and palaces, stole rare artifacts, and killed thousands of women and children; They demolished schools and libraries, setting them on fire. The great Library of Baghdad, the most magnificent library on earth at that time, was targeted. It was a repository of the collective knowledge of Muslims for over six hundred years, encompassing all sciences, literature, and arts, with various translations from all foreign sciences; It contained millions of volumes and books, which the Mongols seized and threw into the Tigris River, turning its water black (Al-Bahji, 2016, pp. 215-220).

Social life in the Arab world was disrupted after the invasions, and signs of social regression appeared, affecting the culture. However, despite this disintegration and regression, social solidarity emerged, and slogans of jihad rose to confront the invasion; Manifestations of Sufism and an interest in religion remained (Natour, 1991, pp. 15-16). Arabic literature during that era expressed sadness and despair, depicting the impact of wars on people and cities; It mourned for the homeland, humanity, and religion (Ghariri, 2014, pp. 15-17). As the Muslim world declined, other forces emerged.

Not only did the Arab countries decline, but European countries also declined after World War I, which reduced their control over other nations, both physical and ideological. The decline of European power led to a shift in global power and the rise of new powers (Thornton, 1962, pp. 335-337). In the early 20th century, America challenged the dominance of Europe. By the mid-20th century, it became a superpower with its imperial path, significantly changing global affairs. Its economic strength, due to industrial achievements, fast population growth, and agricultural production, led to its grip on international power and the transformation of global politics (Grenville, 2005, p. 65). This power disruption between the West and the East resulted in a conflict between the two civilizations which is introduced in the next section.

Bridging Continents: Arab-Western Historical Dynamics

Modern and contemporary Arab world history is intertwined with the history of Europe and



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later the United States, from the sixteenth century to the present, primarily due to economic reasons. The failure of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century provided an opportunity for Western ambitions in Arab countries; The colonization of Arab countries by various Western nations and Arab resistance transformed into armed resistance because of the political, economic, social, and cultural contradictions between the colonial powers and Arabs (Al-Mahjoubi, 2009, pp. 17-19).

Arab and Muslim cultures dominate the Middle East but also include Persians, Turks, Kurds, and other ethnic groups. This diversity led to inner conflicts in the Middle East, and the Sunni-Shia conflict in some parts led to political implications; The colonization of the Middle East, which underlined the cause of many Middle Eastern conflicts, intensified the conflict and the power struggle (Grenville, 2005, pp. 417-421). The relationship between the East and West is complicated, with the East internalizing the West's idealistic ideologies. The Muslim world in the 20th, from their first interaction with the modern capitalist Western World, was receptive to the socio-economic aspects of the contemporary world; Muslim politicians and intellectuals viewed the spread of the West in their territories as a historical development and were enthusiastic about redesigning the socioeconomic and political structures of their societies after the Western model (Hosseini-Zadeh, 2005, p. 17).

The initial openness to Western modernist ideas turned to resistance because of the imperialistic politics that the Western countries used. Many events led to an escalation of resistance, which became more violent; The declaration of the establishment of Israel in 1948 triggered armed movements, particularly in the Arab countries; National liberation movements continued, and Arab countries gained independence, except for Palestine, which remained under Israeli occupation; Despite liberation and development, the Arab world fell behind Western countries; The United States occupied Iraq after the events of September 11, 2001, and began spreading the idea that Islam had become a threat to peace in the world, especially in Western countries (Al-Mahjoubi, 2009, pp. 79, 255-232).

This conflict was framed as terrorism instead of resistance because the Western world classified it as such. The West attributed the cause to Islamic extremism and failed to acknowledge its policies in the East and the economic and cultural exploitation of the countries they had their occupation and politics in their colonies, which encouraged many in the Muslim world to embrace religion as a tool for resistance and identity assertion (Hosseini-Zadeh, 2005, p. 5). This led to the emergence of the term Islamophobia, which spread widely due to Western policies towards Muslims and Islam at the beginning of the 21st century. The stereotype of Islam as violent led to the proliferation of certain types of negative stereotypes (Bleich, 2021, p. 181). The spread of negative stereotypes about Islam resulted in the publication of offensive cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten 2005, which led to a global conflict between supporters of free speech and those who considered it religious insensitivity; This conflict began with protests and escalated to international threats (Harkness et al, 2007, pp. 275-277). The conflicts and the social and historical context have been reflected in literary works in both the East and the West. The exchange of ideologies led to literature being



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influenced by history, and the perception of this history was also affected by literature. This background sets the stage for a New Historicist analysis of Ibn Fadlan's portrayal across cultures, with the key concepts introduced in the following section.

Greenblatt's Cultural Poetics: The Dynamics of Cultural Artifacts

Cultural products, including novels, films, and TV series, influence and are influenced by culture. To comprehend cultural products, it is essential to consider their historical context. According to Greenblatt (1989), literary criticism provides a set of terms to describe the relationship between art and its historical context, specifically the historical events it references; However, despite their rich history, these terms often seem inadequate for addressing cultural phenomena; To address this, Greenblatt developed the term cultural poetics to describe how material, especially historical and official documents, is transformed from its original discourse into aesthetic properties (p. 11).

New Historicism is a self-conscious and analytical method that examines how cultural artifacts gain meaning within their social and historical contexts. It seeks to understand the collective creation of cultural practices and the dynamic relationships among them, exploring how cultural boundaries are defined and shifted; New Historicism is a practice rather than a doctrine, emphasizing how cultural artifacts such as literature acquire compelling force or social energy within their specific cultural settings (Greenblatt, 1988, pp. 5- 6).

Historical contexts are viewed as developing networks of social forces that influence and influence literature. Literature is part of a system of signs within a broader cultural system. This cultural system shapes individuals by governing the transition from abstract concepts to their historical embodiments; Subsequently, the author's behavior is an expression of the cultural codes that shape behavior and reflect these codes (Greenblatt, 1989, pp. 3-5).

Literary texts often enforce their cultural boundaries reflecting the practices and beliefs of their culture. According to Greenblatt (1995), the set of beliefs and practices of a given culture function as a "pervasive technology of control" within which a social behavior must be contained; in addition to the "constraint" features of culture, "mobility" is another aspect of culture and literary text often serves as mediums that enforce cultural boundaries through "praise and blame" reflecting the beliefs and practices of their time (pp. 225-226). Works of literature are not "pure" but rather a product of a set of manipulations; It is a kind of negotiation between the author and the society, and to achieve this negotiation the author needs to create "currency" a systematic adjustment necessary to enable the exchange to take place (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 12).

The relationship between artistic works and culture is an ongoing, reciprocal process where each influences the other. The exchange between them happens through three processes: appropriation, purchase, and symbolic acquisition; Appropriation is the process of taking something of the public domain without payment; language is the greatest cultural product for



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literature to appropriate without payment and appropriation can represent groups especially vulnerable ones without consideration of the consequences; purchase refers to the payment to accomplish the exchange like customs; Symbolic acquisition, representing the social practices are transformed to the artworks through representation; furthermore there is three types of symbolic acquisition: simulation, representing ceremonial elements, metaphorical acquisition, where social practices are indirectly referred to using substitutes; and Acquisition through Synecdoche or Metonym where part of practice stands for the whole (Greenblatt, 1988, pp. 8-11). Negotiation is aimed at creating resonance and arousing wonder. Resonance and wonder are explained in the next section from Greenblatt's perspective.

Theoretical Foundations: Contextualizing Ibn Fadlan's Adaption

This section examines the backdrop of adaptations of Ibn Fadlan's manuscript in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, focusing on works by Michael Crichton, John McTiernan, and Najdat Anzour. Through cultural poetics, it explores how each creator represents Ibn Fadlan within their specific cultural and historical contexts, highlighting the character's portrayal and the openings of each adaptation. First, the context of the three adaptations is introduced, followed by an analysis of the literary and cinematic depictions during the time of their creation. The third part addresses how diverse contexts influence the unique openings of each adaptation and create different depictions.

Contextual Influences: Modern Retellings

Michael Crichton, author of *Eaters of the Dead* and over twenty other books, is also a doctor and filmmaker. His works often incorporate scientific foundations, with clearly defined heroes and villains, appealing to readers who appreciate comprehensible explanations of science (Miller, 2006, p. 93). Most of Crichton's novels start with a "what if?" scenario, exploring the consequences of hypothetical events spiraling out of control (Tanne, 2008, p. 1171). Scientific and historical research underpinned his novels' writing process. When he accepted the challenge to create an engaging modern adaptation of *Beowulf*, he began by taking notes for the novel, drawing from epic poetry and mythology, and removing "the poetic invention" to present a "kernel of genuine human experience" to resonate with readers (Crichton, 1997, p. 109). Published in 1976, *Eaters of the Dead* was influenced by the socio-cultural context of its time, referencing a 10th century Arabic journey to the Volga. Cultural poetics examines the context of the text and the historical event it references (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 11).

Crichton's interest in science led him to add logical elements to his fantasy world, opting for an "eyewitness" rather than an invented character; he chose Ibn Fadlan, having studied English at Harvard and read portions of the manuscript, which had not been fully translated into English (Crichton, 1997, p. 110). The 1970s saw a burgeoning interest in historical and science fiction, genres rooted in previous decades but gaining popularity for blending facts with fiction, reflecting a willingness to explore different times and cultures (Harris-Fain, 2005, p. 12). Audiences were eager for new trends, and Crichton capitalized on this interest.



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Despite Crichton's stated reason for writing his novel, the historical context reveals additional dimensions. The 1970s were marked by historical conflicts, including the Cold War and the Oil Crisis, which led to international panic and economic recession (Woertz, 2013, pp. 5-7, 111-112). This period fostered both fascination and anxious curiosity about the "Other" encompassing both Arabs and Russians, themes present in Ibn Fadlan's story. Greenblatt (1988) asserts that no work is created from absolute originality; there is always a preceding influence (p. 2).

The 1970s also represented a peak of creative brilliance and ingenuity, continuing into the 1980s, a decade dominated by action movies. John Campbell McTiernan Jr., an American action filmmaker, emerged during this time, adding style and depth to the genre. He transformed action films from mere explosions and mindless kinetics into more compelling narratives, emphasizing "stratospheric epic settings." His heroes, unlike the supreme rulers or unspeakable superheroes of the past, were vulnerable, experiencing doubt and fear (Taylor, 2018, pp. 1-9).

Hollywood's fascination with Crichton was evident, particularly with the successful 1993 adaptation of his novel *Jurassic Park*. McTiernan directed his film based on *Eaters of the Dead*, initially titled the same but later changed to *The 13th Warrior* due to feedback that the original title was too frightening (The following preview in HD, 2022, 00:37:07). The production history of the movie was fraught with conflict; McTiernan had a different vision than Crichton, leading to on-set disputes. McTiernan's version of the film, tested in Southern California, did not meet expectations, resulting in Crichton taking over reshoots and launching the movie in 1999. McTiernan (2011) critiqued his own production, noting that "the monsters were not serious enough" (The following preview in HD, 2022, 00:02:13). Literature functions within a broader cultural system, reflecting and shaping societal norms and behaviors (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 4). Both McTiernan and Crichton used Ibn Fadlan to reflect American cultural codes, albeit in different ways. Crichton focused on Beowulf, using Ibn Fadlan as an eyewitness (Crichton, 1997, p. 109), whereas McTiernan wanted to Americanize the Arab character, a change Crichton did not approve (The following preview in HD, 2022, 00:05:40).

Crichton preferred professional-based fiction, maintaining scientific plausibility (Diaz-Santos, 2018, p. 31), and aimed to preserve this sense in the movie. *The 13th Warrior*, like all literary works, is a product of negotiation between cultures and producers, each making adjustments to enable cultural exchange (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 12). While Crichton refused to transform the Arab character into an American, he also blurred cultural boundaries by not integrating Arabic elements like music, which McTiernan wanted to include. According to McTiernan (2011), the production company and Crichton aimed to "hide the Arab sequences and hide the fact that he was Arab" (The following preview in HD, 2022, 00:42:38).

In 2007, Najdat Anzour produced *Saqf Al-Alam* amidst heightened Western and Eastern conflicts. This work aimed to provide a civilized artistic response to Danish attempts to insult Muslims and the Prophet Muhammad, reminding both Danes and Arabs of Baghdad's historical



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significance as the world's capital a thousand years ago (Al-Jaml, 2006, par. 2). With Iraq under American occupation and ongoing Shia-Sunni conflict, Anzour addressed the offensive cartoons by asserting that Arab regimes especially Shias and wrongful practices pushed the West toward such perceptions (Ibrahim, 2007, par. 8).

Anzour used Islam to preserve Arab identity, reflecting contemporary Arab society. In *Saqf Al-Alam*, Islam serves as a "pervasive technology of control" (Greenblatt, 1995, p. 225) that shapes Ibn Fadlan's behavior, contrasting in some aspects with *Eaters of the Dead*, which does not strictly adhere to Islamic rules, thus blurring religious boundaries. Anzour blended historical and contemporary elements, telling the story of an Arab student pursuing a PhD in Denmark during the 2005 cartoon crisis and focusing on Ibn Fadlan's journey to the European north in the 10th century. The series engages with online conspiracy theories about the cartoons being a plot by the CIA and Mossad.

Associated with the communist trend in Syrian culture and a regular at the Soviet Cultural Center in Damascus, Anzour's message of defending Islam and the Prophet is viewed by some as a ploy to exploit religious sentiments for production purposes (Sham, 2007, par. 4). This reflects a process of exchange between society and artwork, with "symbolic acquisition" representing familiar social practices and metaphors (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 10). Linking *Saqf Al-Alam* to religion during a time of religious controversies and national liberation movements (Al-Mahjoubi, 2009, p. 19) was a strategic marketing move that Anzour promoted even before the series' production. The context of the time of the adaptations leads to diverse depictions to the same story.

Literary and Cinematic Depictions: Ibn Fadlan's Portrait

Each of the three adaptations distinctly represents Ibn Fadlan, despite the lack of historical information about him beyond his name mentioned in his manuscript (Al-Dahan, 1991, pp. 37-39). Before introducing Ibn Fadlan, Crichton provides a historical account of the Vikings and their perception in modern Western culture, challenging the notion of Eastern civilization's superiority by asserting, "it is certainly now impossible to regard the prehistoric Europeans as savages idly awaiting the blessings of Eastern civilization." Crichton aims to present Ibn Fadlan as a credible witness relatable to Western readers, emphasizing that while little is known about him, he was familiar with the caliphate but did not hold it in high regard (Crichton, 1997, pp. 19-21).

The existence of art always implies a return, measured in terms of pleasure and interest, as society's dominant currencies are money and prestige (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 12). Crichton's systematic adjustment involves adding dramatic details to Ibn Fadlan's character, making him more accessible to readers. He portrays Ibn Fadlan as a dedicated Muslim whose faith does not hinder his observations of Viking culture, describing their practices as vulgar, obscene, and barbaric, yet reporting them truthfully despite his distaste (Crichton, 1997, p. 21). Ibn Fadlan is introduced as a prestigious figure based on Western ideals of youth, education, wealth, and



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independence from his master or Islamic agenda, making him a trustworthy witness. In the movie adaptation, *The 13th Warrior*, McTiernan initially wanted to either diminish the Arab character or create a heavily Arab setting by incorporating Arabic music. He even considered casting Michael Keaton, a very white American actor, to play the protagonist for his comedic appeal, but Keaton was unavailable (The following preview in HD, 2022, 00:07:28). McTiernan aimed to add a comic thread to the movie, making the characters more multidimensional by showcasing their human emotions like doubt and fear (Taylor, 2018, pp. 7-8). Antonio Banderas was eventually cast as Ibn Fadlan, unintentionally reinforcing the stereotype of the Arab surrounded by large Nordic actors, thereby feminizing the Arab character through the portrayal of his significant robes and kohl-lined eyes (Cumberland, 2002, p. 191). This depiction underscores the orientalist stereotype of a delicate East opposed to a strong West, showing how cultural narratives are crafted and maintained through media and literature, perpetuating certain cultural perceptions and biases over time.

Omar Sharif, who played the translator character and a friend of Ibn Fadlan's father, accompanied Ibn Fadlan on his voyage. Sharif, a well-educated polyglot, had previously starred in the famous historical film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). According to Greenblatt (1988), people derive pleasure and interest from traces of the past in literary works, with every artwork being a collective invention shaped by a culture's shared emotions, stories, and dreams rather than solely by the artist's skill (pp. 3-4). The film manifested traces of both Ibn Fadlan's narrative and *Lawrence of Arabia*, highlighting the ongoing relationship between East and West. Crichton switched the colors worn by Sharif from black in *Lawrence of Arabia* to white in *The 13th Warrior*, while Ibn Fadlan wore black just like Lawrence, emphasizing the interplay of historical and cultural symbols (The following preview in HD, 2022, 00:18:09).

While McTiernan and Crichton emphasized the physical differences between Ibn Fadlan and the Vikings, portraying the Vikings as giants in comparison to Ibn Fadlan, Anzour attempted to diminish this contrast. He cast Qays Sheikh Najib (1977-) as Ibn Fadlan and Pierre Dagher (1963-) as Beowulf, both of whom are physically similar. Additionally, he cast Mustafa El Khani (1979), a redhead who is shorter and smaller than Ibn Fadlan, in the role of Herger. Anzour's approach was similar to McTiernan's, with both directors working with large budgets and extensive crews. They built a complete Viking city for their works. However, in the series, Anzour constructed the city of Baghdad on a scale equivalent to the historical old city, including its castles and historical landmarks (Qanawi, 2007, par. 6).

Regarding the differences between the series and the film, Anzour (2007) stated that the film focused on the war and combat aspects, presenting them in a Hollywood style that relies on elements of spectacle and excitement, rendering it superficial. In contrast, the series focused on the human and moral aspects of the Muslim character, showcasing Baghdad as the capital of the Islamic state at its peak of glory and prosperity, brimming with knowledge and scholars, serving as a beacon for the entire world. Meanwhile, other lands were drowning in ignorance, poverty, and cultural backwardness. The series avoided superficial treatment and highlighted



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Ibn Fadlan's journey and his foundational role in cultural developments in Europe (par. 3). These depictions, influenced by their respective contexts, can be traced from the early openings of the adaptations.

Divergent Openings: Introducing Ibn Fadlan

The opening of each adaptation of Ibn Fadlan's manuscript differs significantly, reflecting the creators' intentions regarding the first impression of Ibn Fadlan or the overarching narrative. Crichton aimed to immerse the reader in a historical context, incorporating paratextual elements such as an introduction to Ibn Fadlan's manuscript, the province of the manuscript, the Vikings, and details about the author before presenting the first chapter of the story. In Ibn Fadlan's original text, the reason for his voyage is introduced directly, with the king of Saqalibah requesting Al-Muqtadir to send individuals to explain the Sharia, build a fort, and a mosque, leading to Ibn Fadlan and others being dispatched on this mission (Ibn Fadlan, 2017, p. 3).

Ibn Fadlan, a diplomat and the group leader, successfully accomplished his mission. From a New Historicist perspective, the relationship between literature, history, and culture is complex. Cultural poetics describes how historical materials are transformed aesthetically for audiences, with each element influencing the others in an ongoing process (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 11). Changing or adding details to the vague manuscript was necessary, particularly given Crichton's objectives. In the 10th century, travels from Baghdad were either voluntary or commissioned, both supported by the Islamic caliphate (Faheem, 1989, pp. 80-82). Travelers held prominent positions, being part of the Islamic nation and funded by the caliphate, observing Islamic religion (Walee, 2018, pp. 369-373).

Crichton's story was initiated with two negative points: first, Ibn Fadlan insulting the Caliphate, which was not a viable choice in his time, and second, a scandalous relationship at the beginning of the story that shapes the impression of Ibn Fadlan (Crichton, 1997, p. 23). Ibn Fadlan's manuscript was bounded by culture and literature, but Crichton's novel challenges and questions these boundaries, suggesting cultural mobility (Greenblatt, 1988, pp. 1-7). This influenced subsequent representations of Ibn Fadlan in various aesthetic productions.

The 13th Warrior, an adaptation of Crichton's novel, both introduce the only Arabic Muslim woman as a cheater, illustrating how Crichton delineated the boundaries between the two religions and nations. The movie begins with Ibn Fadlan on a ship, scarred in comparison to the large Nordic warriors. He introduces himself and recounts the story of a beautiful woman who "belongs to another man," a relationship that led to his banishment from his home (McTernan, 1997, 00:01:26-51). Screenwriter Warren Lewis (2011) expressed pride in being associated with the only major American action movie of the late talking era featuring "a Muslim hero." However, this hero was not portrayed as devout, as movies typically avoid touching on faith (The following preview in HD. 2022, 00:09:025).

Literature contains cultural traces; how it represents shame, sexuality, religion, or encounters with new people reflects societal contradictions and tensions (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 115). These



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adaptations reveal the tension between the West and East. *Saqf Al-Alam* reinforced Islamic religious boundaries by introducing two timelines: a modern timeline with Nara studying in Denmark and defending Prophet Mohammed after the offensive cartoons, and a 10th century timeline where Ibn Fadlan is sent on his voyage after his fiancé's father deems him unworthy following his father's death and the loss of his money at sea (Anzour, 2007, ep. 1). While aware of Crichton's manipulations, they also introduced negative reasons behind the trip.

The portrayal of women also varies, particularly concerning Arab women, who are depicted in various roles such as mothers, fiancées, intelligent servants, and students defending Islam. This variation highlights the fundamental differences in how the two cultures represent Arab women and their relationship with Ibn Fadlan. The representations depend on the differing cultural contexts, and although Anzour was influenced by American productions and his motivation for creating the series was not purely religious, the impact of Arab culture is more prominently evident.

Concluding Remarks

The historical and cultural contexts of the 10th, 20th, and 21st centuries are influential in the study of the portrayal of Ibn Fadlan in multiple adaptations, illustrating how a formal report has been transformed into an aesthetic discourse. Through cultural poetics, this paper has examined how the creators' cultures affected the representation of Ibn Fadlan. cultural poetics shows how specific details were negotiated by the creators, allowing the text to be modified to suit various cultural settings. The different adaptations and propagation of Ibn Fadlan across the three adaptations *Eaters of the Dead*, *The 13th Warrior*, and *Saqf Al-Alam* highlight the complexities of cultural representation and the ongoing negotiation between history and literature. Representations can differ within the same culture, as evidenced by the complexities in *The 13th Warrior* production between Crichton and McTiernan.

This paper examined the first research question by relating Ibn Fadlan's adaptations to their socio-historical contexts through Greenblatt's Cultural poetics. It demonstrated that literature and media can shape and be shaped by cultural and historical forces, as seen in these adaptations. Crichton's, McTernan's, and Anzour's works illustrate how literature and media can influence and be influenced by cultural and historical forces, offering valuable insights into how historical texts can be reimagined to resonate with diverse audiences.

The research reviews the various narratives about Ibn Fadlan and the implications each narrative faced. This highlights the importance of applying Cultural poetics to analyze the transformation of historical texts, revealing the complex links between past and present, and the role of cultural artifacts in influencing contemporary perceptions. Ultimately, this paper underscores the significance of applying New Historicism to scrutinize the transformations of historical texts, revealing the intricate connections between past and present and the role of cultural artifacts in reflecting and influencing contemporary perceptions.



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