

# **Eaters of the Dead: The Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan Study Guide**

**Eaters of the Dead: The Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan by Michael Crichton**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Eaters of the Dead: The Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Introduction.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter One, The Departure from the City of Peace.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Two, The Ways of the Oguz Turks.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Three, First Contact with the Northmen.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Four, The Aftermath of the Northmen's Funeral.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Five, The Journey to the Far Country.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Six, The Encampment at Trelburg.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Seven, The Kingdom of Rothgar in the Land of Venden.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Eight, The Events that Followed the First Battle.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Nine, The Attack of the Glowworm Dragon Korgon.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Ten, The Desert of Dread.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Eleven, The Counsel of the Dwarf.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Twelve, The Events of the Night Before the Attack.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Thirteen, The Thunder Caves.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Fourteen, The Death Throes of the Wendol.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Fifteen, The Return from the North Country.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Appendix: The Mist Monsters, Sources, and A Factual Note on Eaters of the Dead.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">49</a>



Topics for Discussion.....51



# Plot Summary

In *Eaters of the Dead*, Michael Crichton weaves a retelling of the Beowulf epic with a marginally factual ancient manuscript about an Arab who travelled North. Ibn Fadlan and his manuscript are purported to be true but their influence on Crichton's book is minimal. Once the Ibn Fadlan Manuscript has been exhausted, Crichton carries on the tale in the same tone and style of Ibn Fadlan. The effect is both interesting and slightly frustrating to the reader. For those scholars interested in Beowulf, Crichton's version varies too much from the original and can cause consternation. At the same time, the reader can appreciate that Crichton has put forth a book that is at once believable fact and false fiction.

Ibn Fadlan is charged by the Caliph of Bagdad to travel on a mission to the North country. On his journey, Ibn Fadlan is sidetracked by a group of Vikings who insist he accompany them on a journey of their own. They say it is part of their tradition that a foreigner must join them in this excursion, helping them form a band of thirteen men. Ibn Fadlan tries to protest but there is no way he can extricate himself from the mission. Ibn Fadlan travels deeper into the Northern countries and is both fascinated and appalled by what he finds there. Ibn Fadlan tries desperately to cling to the tenants of his Muslim faith but the Vikings do not take kindly to his prayers or mentions of Allah. Ibn Fadlan is constantly repulsed by the mannerisms of the Viking people but also finds there are several similarities between his culture and theirs.

Buliwyf is the leader of the thirteen men who travel across the sea to the kingdom of Rothgar. Buliwyf stands to be made king in his own territory should he return successful and this is why he undertakes this journey. A messenger reveals that a terrible monster known as the wendol has been attacking Rothgar's hall. Rothgar is an old man with an aging constituency and so is unable to mount a suitable war party against the wendol. Buliwyf agrees to take on the task even though a premonition suggests he will not survive the encounter.

The wendol are hairy creatures that come out of the mist to attack suddenly. They possess humanlike qualities and yet are not completely human. They are lead by an aging female who surrounds herself with snakes and lives deep in the thunder caves near the sea. When attempts by Buliwyf and his men fail to vanquish the wendol on land, a dwarf tells the men they will have to seek out the female in the thunder caves. Only when the mother has been slain will the wendol become less of a threat and easier to overcome.

Ibn Fadlan is expected to fight alongside the Viking warriors even though he is inexperienced in battle. He quickly becomes lost in their battle frenzy and even finds himself ravishing slave women prior to battle in the same manner the Viking warriors do. Ibn Fadlan maintains his Muslim faith but also adopts many Viking ways. His willingness to participate in their adventure earns him an honored place among the company and in Rothgar's hall. Ibn Fadlan is even one of the warriors chosen to prepare Buliwyf's body



for burial and to engage in the ceremonial slaying of a young woman who will be burnt alongside Buliwyf's body.

Despite his new found capabilities and his friendship with several of Buliwyf's warriors, Ibn Fadlan begs leave to return to his own country and conclude his original mission for the Caliph. Ibn Fadlan is finally given permission to return South and he never sees the Viking warriors again. When he departs the Viking camp he promises to write about their epic battle and Buliwyf's heroism. The Ibn Fadlan Manuscript is supposed to contain this story.



# Introduction

## Introduction Summary

The introduction provides the reader with detailed background information on the Ibn Fadlan Manuscript. In A.D. 921, the king of Bagdad sends Ibn Fadlan north to the king of the Bulgars. However, Ibn Fadlan's journey is interrupted when he encounters a group of Viking warriors and is forced to accompany the band on a mission to kill mist monsters. After being gone for three years, Ibn Fadlan returns to Bagdad and records his adventure in an official court document. Although the original document no longer exists, there are several fragmentary documents which now constitute the manuscript.

Following the discussion of the manuscript, Crichton discusses the differences between Ibn Fadlan's observations about the Vikings and the common European view of the Northmen. Crichton reviews the numerous ways that show the Vikings were not the barbarians Europeans made them out to be. The Viking lifestyle is surprisingly modern with a strong sense of ritual.

Finally Crichton talks about Ibn Fadlan himself. Ibn Fadlan has a unique writing style that may seem strange to readers. Ibn Fadlan is like a news reporter who presents only the facts and does not detract from his story with wordy descriptions. Unlike the bardic tales readers are used to reading from this era, Ibn Fadlan writes for informational, not entertainment, purposes. He also does not offer speculation on what he encounters. When Ibn Fadlan reports on something he sees with his very own eyes, he says he saw it happen. If a matter is told to him and he does not directly witness it, he tells the reader he has not directly seen the event.

## Introduction Analysis

The introduction is very informative. The reader is provided all the necessary information needed to understand Ibn Fadlan's story. Additionally, the precise nature of the introduction alerts the reader to the authenticity of the story. All of this background information tells the reader that what he is about to read is historically true. Crichton does an excellent job of setting the stage for his masterful retelling and artfully uses the introduction as the initial bait which draws the reader into the story. The introduction presents background information but in such a way that the reader feels he is already in the story and well acquainted with the characters.



# Chapter One, The Departure from the City of Peace

## Chapter One, The Departure from the City of Peace Summary

The chapter begins with an invocation to Allah and an introduction of the author, Ibn Fadlan. Ibn Fadlan gives his full name and station. He does not linger on details but comes directly to the point by telling the reader that a letter has arrived from Yiltawar, King of the Saqaliba. The letter requests someone be sent who can instruct him in the ways of Islam and help him establish a mosque. The Caliph of Bagdad chooses Ibn Fadlan for the task and Ibn Fadlan tells why he is chosen.

Ibn Fadlan's style of narration does not leave room for extraneous details. He tells the reader exactly what they need to know and no more. Ibn Fadlan lists the items gathered to take to the King and the people who will journey with him. Once the party begins to travel, Ibn Fadlan offers only succinct descriptions of their trip. One passage tells of a series of rivers the men had to cross. The names of the rivers are listed in the order crossed but no other details about the surrounding land is given. The party is traveling in a northern direction and as they progress the weather becomes increasingly colder. Ibn Fadlan notes the change in climate and the reader senses he has never been out of his native Bagdad before. Ibn Fadlan is a learned man but he has accomplished most of his learning with books. His personal experiences have been limited and this journey north is probably his first time traveling outside of his homeland.

## Chapter One, The Departure from the City of Peace Analysis

Ibn Fadlan's writing style may be strange to readers. Ibn Fadlan does a wonderful job of baiting the reader's attention. He tells of coming to a forest and seeing mountains with hot springs gushing from them. These areas sound enchanting to the reader but he is left to devise a mental picture on his own. Ibn Fadlan does not offer flowing descriptions of the land he passes through or even comment on how he feels about the journey. The only personal observation Ibn Fadlan makes is that it is cold and getting colder. The reader is probably confused about where exactly Ibn Fadlan is heading since most readers would not have an understanding of ancient geography. Ibn Fadlan tries to position the reader along his trail by naming the various rivers he crosses but, again, without a map of the area the reader is utterly lost.

Even though Ibn Fadlan does not provide the reader with a great amount of detail, he still manages to create an enjoyable and personal narrative. The story of how he spends an afternoon with another man's wife which results in his nomination to the



traveling party is hysterical. The reader can picture a small, scrawny scholarly looking fellow who cowers before the strong courtiers. Because Ibn Fadlan does not ever describe himself, the reader is free to imagine Ibn Fadlan as he sees fit and as the story progresses, the idea of a backwards acting character increases.





# Chapter Two, The Ways of the Oguz Turks

## Chapter Two, The Ways of the Oguz Turks Summary

Ibn Fadlan begins this chapter by telling the reader about the Oguz Turks. These people are nomadic by nature and do not share the same religious beliefs as Ibn Fadlan's people. Ibn Fadlan tells about the governmental structure of the Turks and also of their personal hygiene practices. Adultery is unknown among the Oguz because if a man sleeps with a woman who is not his wife, he is immediately killed. When a man of some repute dies, he is buried in a large pit along with all his possessions and several slain horses to aide his journey in the next life.

Ibn Fadlan's party departs the Oguz and travels on until they are confronted by a man who refuses them passage. Ibn Fadlan gives the man many gifts in hopes of winning his favor but the man announces the travelers are spies. After seven days, the man and his cohorts agree to release Ibn Fadlan and the traveling party. The group quickly departs and travels on until they come to a river that must be crossed by boat. A group of warriors travels in the first boat so as to protect the others on the far shore. They cross several more rivers in this fashion until they come to the river Gayih. This is the largest and swiftest river, and several men, horses, and camels perish in the attempt to cross this river. Ibn Fadlan again lists a long series of rivers the party crosses, noting the distance between each river is two to four days on land. At last the party comes to the land of the Bulgars on the shores of the river Volga.

## Chapter Two, The Ways of the Oguz Turks Analysis

Ibn Fadlan's interest in the Oguz Turks is interesting. The reader may assume Ibn Fadlan takes pains to note so much these people so he may pass it on to his own Caliph and the King. However, there seems to be a personal interest in these people also. Ibn Fadlan is particularly disgusted by the Oguz's practice of calling upon Allah even though they do not believe in the god. Ibn Fadlan finds this to be a backhanded practice used to make business deals. He is also appalled at the personal hygiene of the Turks. These people do not bath and yet relieve themselves wherever they desire. Ibn Fadlan's lengthy description of these people and their lifestyle follows with the assumption that he has not traveled far outside of Bagdad. While Ibn Fadlan is certainly cataloging everything he sees on his trip in order to report to the Caliph upon his return, the reader assumes he is also noting everything he encounters out of his own sense of curiosity.



# Chapter Three, First Contact with the Northmen

## Chapter Three, First Contact with the Northmen Summary

Ibn Fadlan is amazed at the presence of the Northmen. He describes them as virtual giants who wear rough clothing and are never seen without a variety of weapons. As quickly as Ibn Fadlan describes the appearance of the Northmen, he turns to their personal behavior. Like the Oguz Turks, the Northmen are not prone to wash themselves after a toilet and Ibn Fadlan likens the people to animals. The merchants establish themselves in large wooden houses where they enjoy the company of many beautiful girls. These girls are the wares the Northmen seek to sell.

The Northmen are having difficulties of their own. Their leader, Wyglif, is very ill and has been sent to live in a sick tent. Ibn Fadlan learns that men go to a sick tent only when it has been determined there is little hope of survival. A new chief has been selected, Buliwyf, but he cannot take leadership until Wyglif passes on. Buliwyf acts the part of leader and sees to the comfort of Ibn Fadlan's traveling party.

For two days Ibn Fadlan stays with the Northmen and on the morning of their departure Wyglif dies. Ibn Fadlan then decides to stay long enough to witness, first hand, the burial rituals of the Northmen. Wyglif's body is laid in a tomb for ten days while the preparations for burial are arranged. Wyglif's possessions are divided into three parts: one for his family, one to purchase a girl to die with him, and the last to be buried alongside him. A wild party ensues in which the Northmen get very drunk and indulge their pleasures with various women. A woman comes forward to say she will be buried with Wyglif. The girl is taken into a hut where she is raped by all of Wyglif's men. She is then held down by two men while the Angel of Death slits the girl's throat. While this act is being performed, the family of Wyglif prepares his ship for burial. The ship is loaded with all of Wyglif's possessions and finally his body is brought forth and placed in the ship. The body of the slain girl is placed beside Wyglif and the entire boat is set on fire. While Ibn Fadlan looks on, the interpreter tells him the Northmen choose to bury their dead in this manner so they reach Paradise faster.

## Chapter Three, First Contact with the Northmen Analysis

Ibn Fadlan begins this chapter with the words, "I saw with my own eyes..." This phrase is used by Ibn Fadlan anytime he wants the reader to know that what is being described is the truth. The phrase signals Ibn Fadlan is not fabricating his story but relaying events as he experienced them. Ibn Fadlan will use this phrase again when he witnesses the



burial of Wyglif. It is important to Ibn Fadlan that the reader know what is truth and what is hearsay. He does not want to be counted as a false teacher and therefore goes to great lengths to distinguish the things he sees firsthand from those things only told to him. This idiosyncrasy of Ibn Fadlan's makes the reader believe all the more that the story is a historical account.

The lengthy description of Wyglif's burial is extremely interesting, though slightly confusing. The reader is amazed at the details put into the burial of the dead. One wonders if every man is afforded such ceremony at death or if only great warriors and leaders are buried in such an elaborate fashion. Many of the steps of the burial ritual make sense to the reader but several may cause some confusion. The placement of the body in a grave for keeping until the actual burial is wise beyond words. Ibn Fadlan is shocked at this behavior but it makes sense for the Northmen. As the footnote to this section states, a dead body in a warm climate would begin to rot and smell after ten days, but the cold climate of the Northmen preserves the body. The gathering of the dead man's possessions to be burned along with him is in accordance with the belief that the dead will need such items in the next world. Even the slaying of a girl to be buried with Wyglif makes sense because he will need some form of pleasure in the next life. However, it is a little unclear why all his men are allowed to rape her before she is killed. Perhaps this is just a tradition that has evolved over the years as the living wish to experience the woman's body before it is destroyed.



# Chapter Four, The Aftermath of the Northmen's Funeral

## Chapter Four, The Aftermath of the Northmen's Funeral Summary

During the burial of Wyglif Ibn Fadlan learns a man named Thorkel desires to take the throne from Buliwuf. He also learns Thorkel wishes to see Ibn Fadlan slain even though Ibn Fadlan has no role in Buliwuf's appointment to the throne. The interpreter counsels Ibn Fadlan to wait and see how the matter will turn out.

While Ibn Fadlan waits, a storm besets the encampment and a thick fog covers the land. Ibn Fadlan notices that the strong Northmen, who do not exhibit fear easily, are extremely fearful of the fog. Ibn Fadlan asks his interpreter about this behavior and learns that because the Northmen are a sailing people, it makes sense they would be afraid of fog, which can steer a boat off course into peril. Ibn Fadlan acknowledges this prudence but does not understand why the Northmen would be afraid of the mist on land. The interpreter does not readily explain this behavior but says only that the mist is always feared.

After several days the mist thins but does not lift. A boat arrives bearing a young man who is one of Buliwuf's relations. At the feast that night the man is introduced as Wulfgar, one of King Rothgar's sons. He has come to ask Buliwuf to travel to Rothgar's hall and battle a fierce monster that comes from the mist. The Angel of Death comes into the hall and reads the bones. She announces Buliwuf must undertake this summons and take with him twelve other men. The old crone further says Ibn Fadlan must accompany the Northmen on their journey since a foreigner must make the trip. Ibn Fadlan has just become the thirteenth warrior and there is nothing he can do to extricate himself from the matter.

## Chapter Four, The Aftermath of the Northmen's Funeral Analysis

The issue of Thorkel's plan to kill both Buliwuf and Ibn Fadlan is not discussed in any detail. It is mentioned and then pushed to the side when the fog rolls across the land. The matter of the mist and the Northmen's reaction to the weather is of more interest to Ibn Fadlan. The reason behind the Northmen's fear is not completely explained at this point but will soon become clear. Ibn Fadlan is a sensible man and fails to understand why such a strong race of men would be scared of a little fog settling on the land. To his learned mind, this is an irrational fear and one that seems out of place among such strong people.



The arrival of Wulfgar and his message is stated in brief and matter of fact terms. Buliwyf is presented with the summons and there really seems no other course of action except for him to undertake the journey farther north. The reading of the bones is not described in much detail but some readers may recognize this act as a common ritual among certain cultures. An old woman or man is revered as a type of prophet able to read the future. This person is used to determine the wisdom of acting in a certain way whenever a difficult situation presents itself. Buliwyf does not argue with the crone's words but rather accepts them and his own fate. The reader is not told what the old woman tells Buliwyf, but from his stern countenance it does not seem likely she predicts a beneficial outcome. Unaccustomed to this manner of acting, Ibn Fadlan tries to refute the crone's pronouncement that he join the war band but his protests fall on deaf ears.



# Chapter Five, The Journey to the Far Country

## Chapter Five, The Journey to the Far Country Summary

Ibn Fadlan gives instruction to his companions regarding the rest of their journey and resigns himself to his own journey with the Northmen. Ibn Fadlan views the commission to travel with the Northmen as a death sentence. His interpreter does not accompany him and at first he feels very isolated because he cannot speak the Northman's speech. However, one of Buliwyf's men, Herger, knows some Latin and soon the two men are able to converse.

Ibn Fadlan gives the reader an in-depth description of the boat they are traveling in and of the great sailing skill of the Northmen. The warriors sail past numerous settlements and Herger points out the town of Bulgar. Bulgar is the home of the King of the Saqaliba where Ibn Fadlan was traveling to before meeting the Northmen. Ibn Fadlan begs to be put ashore but the Northmen ignore his pleas. After almost two weeks on the river the Northmen make landfall at Massborg and resume their journey on horseback. Ibn Fadlan struggles to adjust to the rigors of traveling with the Northmen. They do not travel at night but the nights are so short that Ibn Fadlan feels he never gets the chance to rest. Herger tells Ibn Fadlan to watch the night sky for mysterious lights and he views the Northern Lights.

The Northmen rise early and travel without bothering to eat first. Around midday, the party stops to eat, but if it is raining, and it often is, the food is eaten without being cooked. Ibn Fadlan finds the constant cold and rain disagreeable and cannot understand why the Northmen are not bothered by the weather. One night as Ibn Fadlan quietly blesses his food, Buliwyf asks to know what it is Ibn Fadlan says. Herger finds Ibn Fadlan's explanation of consecrating food humorous. Buliwyf wishes to know if Ibn Fadlan can write and Ibn Fadlan proceeds to write "Praise be to God" in the dirt with a stick. Buliwyf appears pleased at Ibn Fadlan's ability to write but one of the other warriors becomes upset when Ibn Fadlan writes his name in the dirt also.

After many long days of travel, the party stops in a village which has liquor. They stay the span of two days before Buliwyf commands them to continue on. The group comes to the village of Lenneborg where they engage in more drinking and sport with women. Ibn Fadlan is surprised at their behavior but is told by Herger that it is customary to behave so before a sea voyage. Several days into the sea voyage the boat comes ashore at Yatlam which is Buliwyf's homeland. The smell of smoke greets the warriors and they find the village and all its inhabitants have been destroyed. Inside one of the smoldering huts, Buliwyf finds his sword, Runding. The party once again boards the boat and continues on towards Rothgar's village.



## Chapter Five, The Journey to the Far Country Analysis

During this chapter Ibn Fadlan and the reader learn a great deal about the Northman's culture. Herger is a great help to Ibn Fadlan and explains many of the sights strange to Ibn Fadlan. However, Herger often becomes impatient with Ibn Fadlan's questions and will eventually refuse to answer any more inquiries. At this point, Ibn Fadlan is forced to sit to the side and observe the actions of his companions.

The Northmen are a happy bunch most at home on the sea. During the sea voyage the men are loud and boisterous in a way they are not while on land. The Northmen delight in being on the open sea and do not view the wide expanse of water as threatening. This contrasts with Ibn Fadlan's feelings about the sea voyage. He is used to the arid desert and probably has not had much experience floating about in a boat on choppy waves. Ibn Fadlan is also unaccustomed to the brash behavior the Northmen exhibit on land. At each village the warriors are anxious for a drink and once they find a village that can supply them with liquor, they stay for several days. The Northmen also find sport in sharing the women of the village, even though many of the men have wives at home. Ibn Fadlan is surprised to learn Herger is married but the Northman holds no misconception that his wife is faithful to him. The Northmen realize they are often gone at sea for long periods of time and with little hope of return. Because of their lifestyle, they do not expect their women to remain chaste. Although Ibn Fadlan views the behavior of the Northmen as uncouth, the reader may begin to realize that in many aspects the Northmen have a very practical approach to life.

The final item of note in this chapter is the appearance of Yatlam village. When the warriors arrive to find the village plundered and destroyed, it alerts Buliwyf and the reader that something very serious is happening on these shores. Apparently the monsters which have been plaguing Rothgar are also extending their attacks to outlying towns. Buliwyf and his men are put on high alert at this point and should realize the problem they have promised to face is much bigger than any of them originally anticipated.



# Chapter Six, The Encampment at Trelburg

## Chapter Six, The Encampment at Trelburg Summary

A few days after leaving Yatlam, the warriors arrive at Trelburg. Trelburg is not so much a town as it is a military camp. There are few women or children living at Trelburg and the village defenses are state of the art. Positioned on a point between two rivers, Trelburg is encircled by an earth wall topped by a wooden fence. The wall is surrounded by a deep moat. Inside the wall is another ditch and a second wall that one must navigate before entering the town itself. Four gates allow entrance to the town but each gate can be closed off during an attack by heavy oak doors. The town is made up of sixteen long wooden huts. The huts have only one low entrance and no entrance faces another. When Ibn Fadlan inquires about the construction of these huts, Herger tells him the low doors force invaders to crouch when entering, allowing a man inside to strike off their heads. Likewise, the entrances do not face one another so when warriors run out of the huts they do not run into each other.

Ibn Fadlan notes the people of Trelburg differ from the Northmen—they are clean. These warriors wash themselves in the nearby river regularly. That night at the feast, Buliwyf learns the extent of the trouble at Rothgar's village. Rothgar's sons have turned against one another. Of Rothgar's five sons only Wiglif, the traitor, and Wulfgar remain alive.

Ibn Fadlan continues to learn more about the ways of the Northmen. Herger tells him the defenses of Trelburg are focused towards the land because that is where the danger lies. The Northmen fear the mists which roll across land. Ibn Fadlan also learns why the crone dictated there should be thirteen warriors. The number thirteen corresponds to the number of times the moon grows full in the course of one year. However, the number thirteen is seen as magical and foreign and so a foreigner is chosen as the thirteenth companion. Ibn Fadlan views the Northmen as irrationally superstitious but does not voice his opinions to them.

Back on the sea Ibn Fadlan asks Herger why the warriors of Trelburg beat their shields to call Odin. Herger explains they are now in dangerous waters inhabited by sea monsters. Ibn Fadlan is skeptical of this explanation until a great commotion is raised at the other end of the boat. Ibn Fadlan looks into the sea and views a gigantic monster swimming beside the boat. The monster is black and spews water into the air before diving beneath the waves. Ibn Fadlan notes the monster has a broad tail that is cleft in two. As he watches, several more monsters appear near the boat until there are a half dozen of them swimming nearby. Ecthgow tells Ibn Fadlan that the monsters often attack boats because they desire to mate with the boat. He himself was once on a boat attacked by the monsters but he managed to survive.





After a few more days of sailing the warriors come to Venden, the land of Rothgar. Ibn Fadlan looks across the land and sees Rothgar's great hall sitting high on a promontory. He is impressed by the magnificence of the hall but when he comments about it, Herger tells him Rothgar is vain. Herger says it was foolish of Rothgar to build such a hall but does not explain why he says this. Ibn Fadlan watches the other warriors and realizes they are all afraid of something but he does not know what.

## Chapter Six, The Encampment at Trelburg Analysis

This chapter brings up two important details. The first is the news that Rothgar's sons war with one another. The reader may wonder if this is the true source of discontent in the kingdom. Perhaps Buliwyf has unknowingly agreed to mediate a family feud. The fact Wiglif has killed three of his brothers is a bit surprising. While it is not unusual for the Northmen to quarrel with one another, it is notable that Rothgar apparently has done nothing to prevent the situation from escalating. Either Rothgar is a doddering old man unable to comprehend what is happening around him, or he is weak in body and spirit and cannot bring himself to face his traitorous son. The impression that Rothgar is failing as a ruler is furthered by Herger's comments about Rothgar's great hall.

The second notable item is the Northmen's reaction to the sea monsters. Quite obviously, the monsters are whales and it is a bit surprising the sea faring Northmen are not more familiar with these creatures. However, the superstitious nature of the Northmen lends itself nicely to the belief in mist monsters.



# Chapter Seven, The Kingdom of Rothgar in the Land of Venden

## Chapter Seven, The Kingdom of Rothgar in the Land of Venden Summary

Buliwyf's party arrives at Rothgar's stronghold. Before disembarking from the ship, the warriors dress in their battle gear. As the group walks along the road towards Rothgar's hall, they see the head of an ox on a spike. The Northmen are bothered by this sign but the meaning of the oxhead is not explained to Ibn Fadlan. Buliwyf directs the warriors to an abandoned farmhouse. Several times as the group walks towards the house, Buliwyf stops and stares at the ground. Ibn Fadlan also studies the ground and observes the imprint of many bare feet. The footprints have indentations from claws and he hears the warriors murmur the word "wendol." Inside the farmhouse the company finds the dismembered bodies of a young man, a woman, and an infant. Ibn Fadlan is sick over the sight but the Northmen discuss the spectacle in quiet tones. Ecthgow discovers a small stone in the field. It is shaped like the torso of a pregnant woman but is devoid of head, legs, and arms. The sight of the carving cause the Northmen to turn pale and Buliwyf flings the object against the ground so it shatters.

The company turns toward Rothgar's great hall and as they approach are met by a herald. The herald conducts the troop to the hall and bids them to remain outside while he announces them to Rothgar. Buliwyf is not happy with being made to wait outside and deems the gesture inhospitable. The herald returns and instructs the warriors to leave their weapons outside.

Ibn Fadlan describes the great hall of Hurot. He is amazed at the elegance of the building, especially since it was built by the uncouth Northmen. Rothgar and Buliwyf each make speeches and gifts are exchanged among the parties. During the feast the herald goes to the doors of Hurot and reports that the mist will not come that night. At this proclamation there is great rejoicing and the feast takes on a cheerier tone. Wiglif, Rothgar's son, makes a toast to Buliwyf that is both praise and insult. Buliwyf returns the gesture in kind and Wiglif becomes frightened that Buliwyf means him harm. A friend of Wiglif's attempts to kill Buliwyf but Buliwyf turns in time to spear the young man and kill him. In order to avoid a larger confrontation, Herger steps forward and diverts attention to Ibn Fadlan. He instructs Ibn Fadlan to tell a story. Ibn Fadlan is at first at a loss for words but then proceeds to tell the assembly the story of an Arabic man and his slippers. The moral of the story is bad things can happen to a man who does not change his slippers. In the morning Ibn Fadlan wakens to the sounds of construction. He rises and finds the village busily building fortifications around Hurot.

That night the feast is subdued because the angel of death foretells that the mists will come that night. Ibn Fadlan is apprehensive about what is to happen. An elderly Northman strikes up a conversation with Ibn Fadlan and from him Ibn Fadlan finally



learns more about the wendol. The old man describes horrific monsters covered in hair and breathing a foul stench. The monsters come from the black mist and this is the reason the Northmen fear the mists. For as long as the man can remember, the villages have tried to protect themselves from the wendol that come out of the mists. The old man echoes Herger's sentiment that the wendol have come because of Rothgar's vanity. He says Rothgar forgot a cardinal rule of the Northmen and that is to never move far from one's weapons. After this exchange, the old man falls asleep and Ibn Fadlan learns no more.

When night falls Buliwyf and his men move about blowing out candles and then settle down to a feigned sleep. Ibn Fadlan does not remember falling asleep but in the wee hours he is awakened by a noise like pigs grunting outside. Ibn Fadlan waits nervously for something to happen. His fear increases as everything falls silent and then with a crash the doors of the hall are broken down. Black mist enters the hall along with a strong stench. Buliwyf lets out a scream and all the warriors jump to their feet. The battle is a fastpaced confusing affair for Ibn Fadlan. It seems that it is over before it begins. Three of Buliwyf's men are dead but they can find no trace of dead wendol. Herger tells Ibn Fadlan this is because the wendol will go to great lengths to make sure all of their men are carried away whether injured or dead. Likewise, the wendol take trophies and Edgtho's head cannot be found. However, Buliwyf manages to cut off one of the monster's arms and they hang the trophy from the rafters of Hurot.

## **Chapter Seven, The Kingdom of Rothgar in the Land of Venden Analysis**

Ibn Fadlan has finally reached his amended destination. The time for apprehension and fear has arrived. Ibn Fadlan watches silently while his companions arm themselves for battle and explore the land surrounding Hurot. There is little Ibn Fadlan can do to help the warriors and he often seems to be a nuisance as he asks Herger for explanations. However, being silent allows Ibn Fadlan to make observations about the Northmen.

The Northmen are excellent warriors and their exploration of the field around the farmhouse shows their tracking abilities. The warriors need to collect as much information as possible about the foe they will be facing. They need to ascertain the approximate number of wendol, whether they come on foot or horseback, and how recently they last waged an attack. The mutilated bodies of the farmer and his family also provide Buliwyf with a wealth of information. The warriors are able to see the methods used by the wendol to attack their prey and just how gruesomely the monsters fight. The statue of the pregnant headless woman is interesting. The small icon obviously evokes immense fear in the strong warriors but Ibn Fadlan is unable to procure an explanation from Herger as to why the item turns the warriors pale.

The feast in Rothgar's hall is also very interesting. Rothgar is too old to wage battle against these monsters and so has called in a favor from Buliwyf. However, Rothgar has five sons who should have been able to gather a suitable war party to face the wendol. However, the sons of Rothgar are too concerned with obtaining their father's throne to

notice that the kingdom they wish to rule is under attack. Wiglif is more concerned with whether or not Buliwyf means to take Rothgar's throne than the fact there may soon be no village left to rule. Rothgar and his family appear to have larger problems than the wendol. In many ways, the mist monsters are the least of Rothgar's worries.



# Chapter Eight, The Events that Followed the First Battle

## Chapter Eight, The Events that Followed the First Battle Summary

Ibn Fadlan is shocked when the Northmen show no excitement following the apparent defeat of the mist monsters. Rothgar does not congratulate Buliwyf and Buliwyf does not express any signs of pleasure at the outcome of the battle. The only time the Northmen do show happiness is when they place the dead warriors in graves to begin the burial process. Ibn Fadlan comes to learn that Northmen are always pleased when a man dies in battle. They view those who die in bed or of old age as cowards.

Ibn Fadlan asks Herger why the warriors are not more excited. Herger replies they are still afraid because the black mist will come again and bring the wendol back. Ibn Fadlan is high on the excitement of his first battle and does not understand why this is a problem. Herger says the wendol will return more ferocious than before and this time they will come in the form of the Korgon, or glowworm dragon. Herger also points out that the day before there were thirteen warriors to fight but now two are dead and two are wounded. Since Rothgar's kingdom does not offer many able bodied men to join the warriors, the entire village is put to work fortifying the hall.

While Ibn Fadlan works among the Northmen he notices a certain beautiful woman. He approaches her warily because Herger warned him against associating with exceptionally beautiful women. Despite Herger's warning, Ibn Fadlan is drawn to the woman. The Northwomen are very tall and pale with blue eyes and long hair piled on top of their heads. Ibn Fadlan is intrigued by the woman but does not understand why the North people prefer their women so thin. He is used to the more curvaceous women of his homeland. The women of the North are also more bold in their actions than those Ibn Fadlan has been around. That night the mist does not come and so the atmosphere in the hall is relaxed. Ibn Fadlan enjoys the comforts of this beautiful woman, though he does not find her odor or her erratic movements all that enjoyable.

The next day Ibn Fadlan is nervous about the return of the wendol. He works silently alongside the Northmen to finish the fortifications around Hurot. As he works, the old gentleman once again comes to talk to Ibn Fadlan. The old man tells Ibn Fadlan that Wiglif and another man are plotting to cause harm to Buliwyf. After the old man walks away, Ibn Fadlan tells what he has learned to Herger. Together the two men report the treason to Buliwyf. Herger and Buliwyf quickly discuss a plan of action and then return to their work. Later in the day Ibn Fadlan observes Herger working near a large man. Herger "accidentally" throws dirt at the youth in order to start a confrontation. The matter must be settled according to tradition. A skin is affixed to four poles and the combatants must remain on the skin while fighting. Each participant is given three shields but when the shields are destroyed, the man must fight without protection. Herger loses all three



of his shields but is able to defeat the other man by cutting off his head. Although Herger has sent a strong message to Wiglif by killing his partner in treason, the loss of a strong man to fight the wendol is cause for sadness.

## Chapter Eight, The Events that Followed the First Battle Analysis

Ibn Fadlan has never had experience in battle before the first encounter with the wendol. The next morning he is still feeling the adrenaline pumping through his body and he feels unstoppable. For the scholarly Arab, the battle with the mist monsters awakens a new sensation within him. Ibn Fadlan is learning life is larger than what he experiences in Bagdad. Although he still finds the Northmen uncouth and strange in their customs, Ibn Fadlan is starting to enjoy their warrior life style. The Northmen never lack for excitement and their simplistic outlook on life allows them to garner greater enjoyment from everyday tasks. The Northmen live every moment as if it may be their last and relish confrontation. As the battle between Herger and Wiglif's friend shows, the Northmen welcome any opportunity to fight. Fighting is a way to show one's power and also an opportunity to die in battle.

As mighty as the Northmen are in battle, they are also practical and acknowledge the impracticality of losing a good man in a silly fight. Wiglif's friend has cost the village a strong warrior and risks the safety of everyone. Buliwyf's party recognizes the importance of proceeding with caution and not rushing headlong into a situation. Wiglif, on the other hand, is too consumed by his personal desires to become king that he cannot focus on the importance of protecting the kingdom he wishes to rule. Wiglif is a rash youth who will not make a good ruler. When Buliwyf arrives at Hurot, it is not his physical strength that worries Wiglif. It is Buliwyf's presence as a leader that makes Wiglif feel threatened in his campaign to overthrow his father.

Ibn Fadlan's encounter with the Northwoman is amusing. At the beginning of the story, Ibn Fadlan's indiscretion with a woman results in his being chosen to journey north. That expedition escalates into the encounter with the Northmen and his forced voyage with them. Herger warns Ibn Fadlan against becoming mixed up with one of the village women but the exotic beauty of the Northern women is too much for Ibn Fadlan to resist. However, the reader may picture Ibn Fadlan as more of an awkward teenager, unsure of what to do when alone with a beautiful woman. Indeed he is certainly uninitiated in the wild intercourse that he experiences with the Northwoman. Instead of being excited by the woman's antics, Ibn Fadlan is repulsed by her vigor and does not pursue another Northern woman again.



# Chapter Nine, The Attack of the Glowworm Dragon Korgon

## Chapter Nine, The Attack of the Glowworm Dragon Korgon Summary

That night the mist comes to cover Hurot. Ibn Fadlan observes the new defenses. Water has been diverted into a shallow ditch in which stakes are placed. An enemy trying to cross the ditch will fall in the water and be impaled on the stakes. Rothgar's women cover the surface of Hurot with water, and Buliwyf and his warriors also drench themselves and their armor with water. Herger explains the reason for the water is because the glowworm dragon breathes fire. The warriors wait for the arrival of the dragon and pass the time by practicing with their various weapons. Ibn Fadlan falls asleep and Herger shoots an arrow at his head as a prank to wake him up. Herger realizes Ibn Fadlan does not like the joke and so he sits to talk with the Arab.

One of the warriors shouts and Ibn Fadlan turns to see fiery points floating through the air. Ibn Fadlan watches the points grow closer and is not afraid because he thinks it is only men on horseback bearing torches. His assumption proves correct as horsemen appear out of the mist. Some horses fall in the trench and others are impaled on the stakes but some manage to knock down the fence. One of the riders comes close to Ibn Fadlan and he sees a large man with the head of the bear. As the monster bears down on him Ibn Fadlan is unable to move, but an axe comes flying through the air and knocks the head of the enemy off. As the bear's head rolls away Ibn Fadlan observes that beneath was actually the head of a man. Ibn Fadlan sees Herger is in danger and drives away one of the creatures. Herger acknowledges the help before returning to the battle. As Ibn Fadlan tries to remove his lance from the creature, he is knocked down by a horseman. It is dawn when Ibn Fadlan finally awakes to the touch of something pleasing and gentle on his cheek. When he opens his eyes, Ibn Fadlan sees it is not the touch of a woman but rather a licking dog who is awakening him. Ibn Fadlan rises and realizes he has been laying in the ditch. He walks across the compound and notices the ground is soaked with blood and littered with bodies of dead women, children and men.

As Ibn Fadlan enters the great hall he sees two dead bodies laid out on fresh rushes. The slain warriors are Skeld and Helfdane, two of Buliwyf's finest men. In the corner he sees Rethel propped up and suffering from a stomach wound. Several women huddle around Rethel offering medical aide as their tradition prescribes. Warriors with extremity wounds are treated with hot cloths or spiderwebs laid over the wound. A warrior with a wound in the head or neck is examined very carefully. If bones can be seen through the wound then the warrior will recover, but if those bones are cracked then the warrior will eventually die. If the wound is in the chest but the man's hands or feet are warm then he will survive. If a man coughs blood because of his wound he stands a fifty-fifty chance of survival. An abdominal wound is considered fatal if the man drinks an onion broth and





the aroma can be smelled emanating from the wound. Rethel is given the onion soup and a woman pronounces that she smells onion at the wound site.

Buliwyf calls together his remaining warriors. Herger does not offer to translate for Ibn Fadlan so he goes to another part of the hall and receives medical attention for his own wounds. A woman washes Ibn Fadlan's wounds with salt water and he winces. Rethel laughs at Ibn Fadlan's reaction and says that he is still an Arab. Herger comes to evaluate whether Ibn Fadlan is fit to ride and announces that the foreigner will accompany them. When Ibn Fadlan asks where they are going Herger says that they must attack the glowworm dragon in its lair or risk losing their lives. The attack will take place in the middle of the day in hopes of surprising the dragon. As Herger and Ibn Fadlan finish speaking a small boy enters the hall bearing another stone statue of the pregnant woman. Ibn Fadlan finally inquires about the meaning of the statue. Herger tells him that it is the image of the dragon's mother. Ibn Fadlan watches as a emotionally drained Buliwyf glances around the hall and then walks outside to prepare for the next battle.

## **Chapter Nine, The Attack of the Glowworm Dragon Korgon Analysis**

Several things occur to the reader in this chapter. The first has been building from previous chapters. When the glowworm Dragon makes its appearance, Ibn Fadlan's first thought is that it is men on horseback, carrying torches. When Herger slays the horseman and the bear's head rolls aside to reveal a man's head, the reader may wonder if these are not in fact friends of Wiglif. The thought does not occur to Ibn Fadlan or to Buliwyf. However, it does seem a distinct possibility given the earlier confrontation between Herger and Wiglif's man. Perhaps the mist monsters are actually Wiglif's friends trying to scare Rothgar into abandoning his throne. This thought may occur to the reader but nothing else in the story supports this theory. Every mention of the monsters following this confrontation maintains their appearance as monsters and not men.

Another thing that happens in this chapter is Ibn Fadlan's slight conversion from an Arab to a Northman. Ibn Fadlan is excited by his participation in the first battle with the mist monsters. He is beginning to understand the Northmen's feelings towards battle and looks forward to another encounter with the wendol. When the glowworm dragon arrives, Ibn Fadlan saves Herger's life. This act makes Ibn Fadlan feel he is becoming part of the warrior party. However, when the confrontation ends, Ibn Fadlan is not included in the conference of Buliwyf's warriors. Herger also does not acknowledge Ibn Fadlan lifesaving act once the battle is over. Additionally, when the women pour salt water over Ibn Fadlan's wounds, he winces. Rethel finds this funny and declares Ibn Fadlan is still an Arab. Ibn Fadlan feels ashamed at this pronouncement. He considers himself part of Buliwyf's warrior party and Rethel's comment shows Ibn Fadlan will never truly be a Northman.





The final thing the reader notes in this chapter happens very quickly. As Buliwyf leaves Hurot his shoulders sag slightly. He is tired and he is losing men rapidly. Buliwyf agrees to a fight that is not his and now he is paying a high price. The reader wonders how much longer Buliwyf will continue but at the same time knows this hero will not quit until the terror is erased.



# Chapter Ten, The Desert of Dread

## Chapter Ten, The Desert of Dread Summary

Around mid-morning Buliwyf has seven horses prepared and the warriors depart Hurot to seek out the glowworm. The warriors also take four hounds Ibn Fadlan considers more like wolves than dogs. Ibn Fadlan does not understand why the Northmen do not take a break between battles. Herger explains it is always this way. Even when a Northmen dies, he will continue to battle in Valhalla.

The warriors follow a trail of blood left by the horsemen from the previous night. The group stops only once to pick up a weapon left behind by the fiends. After noon the landscape changes. the riders travel through a brackish tarn that looks like a desert, except it is soggy and damp. Ibn Fadlan notes the Northmen call this area the desert of dread. In the desert, mist lays on land in small pockets. The mist hangs near the ground but is as high as the horses knees. At times the warriors lose sight of the dogs because the mist is so thick. The deeper the riders progress into the desert, the quieter they become and the dogs do not yelp as much. All of a sudden the dogs stop and refuse to go any farther. Ibn Fadlan can see no difference in the terrain but Buliwyf announces they have entered the land of the wendol. As the party continues on Ibn Fadlan sees the heads of the beasts mounted on high poles. Herger explains these bear skulls are used to protect the borders of the wendol's land. They also see a giant carving of the headless pregnant woman. The rock is covered with blood from sacrifices. Ibn Fadlan is surprised to realize the Northmen, who were previously nervous, are now at ease. When Ibn Fadlan tells Herger he is afraid Herger counsels him to stop thinking about what lies ahead and be cheerful in this moment. Ibn Fadlan replies his people have a saying which is: "Thank Allah, for in his wisdom he put death at the end of life, and not at the beginning." Herger likes the saying and rides forward to tell Buliwyf.

The riders crest the hill and look down upon an encampment. The valley is filled with crude huts but there is no sign of life. Herger tells Ibn Fadlan the wendol sleep during the day and Buliwyf hopes to surprise and slay the wendol in their sleep. The warriors descend on the camp without speaking. The warriors divide themselves into pairs and each pair attacks a hut. Each of the smaller huts is found to be empty. Echgow calls to the other warriors to come see what is in one of the larger huts. The floor of the hut is scattered with fragments of the bones of the wendols' enemies. Another warrior notices a large throne-like chair with carvings of snakes and demons in the back. The foot of the chair is littered with skulls and the arms of the chair are bloody and covered in brain matter. Small stone carvings form a circle around the chair. The warriors depart the camp and climb back up the hill after setting fire to the huts.



## Chapter Ten, The Desert of Dread Analysis

The reader continues to wonder if the wendol are not actually men. Since the camp is found deserted it seems possible the "monsters" are absent because they have returned to their villages. It still seems possible the mist monsters are a type of secret society of men hoping to overthrow the king. Wiglif could have gathered a large number of supporters and used the Northman's fear of the mist to his advantage. However, given what the reader has learned of Wiglif thus far, it seems unlikely the nervous usurper could have formulated such an elaborate plan. It would take a lot of time and effort to maintain a separate camp, raid neighboring villages, and appear normal at home. However, the reader cannot help but continue to wonder about this possibility, since it would create a whole new dynamic in the story.



# Chapter Eleven, The Counsel of the Dwarf

## Chapter Eleven, The Counsel of the Dwarf Summary

The warriors quickly depart the camp and head back for Rothgar's great hall. As they near Hurot, Buliwyf leads the party in a different direction. Ibn Fadlan asks Herger about their altered destination and Herger says they are seeking out the dwarves. Ibn Fadlan is surprised to learn there are dwarves in the North because he has never seen or heard of them. Soon the warriors come to a region of caves where Buliwyf dismounts and proceeds on foot. Herger explains the dwarves have magical powers and do not fear men but they are afraid of horses and that is why the warriors left their mounts outside. Ibn Fadlan looks around the cave and sees several great cauldrons sizzling and steaming. As he watches, the dwarves plunge steel blades in and out of a cauldron. The dwarves make weapons the Northmen prize highly.

Buliwyf asks after a soothsayer. Buliwyf sits quietly in front of this soothsayer and waits for the dwarf to speak. The dwarf tells Buliwyf the eaters of the dead will bring about Buliwyf's own death. The dwarf tells Buliwyf the attack in the desert of dread was not a true hero's enterprise. The dwarf continues to tell Buliwyf he acted as a mere man and not a proper hero. The tengol says Buliwyf must attack the mother of the wendol and therefore must venture to the thunder caves. The dwarf says Buliwyf must choose between being a man and being a hero. Buliwyf makes a reply Ibn Fadlan cannot hear but which pleases the dwarf. Several dwarves come forward carrying many objects. The dwarves give the warriors lengths of rope and seven daggers. Buliwyf prepares to leave and asks when they should attack the wendol. The dwarf says it is better to make haste than to wait. Buliwyf asks to know what will happen if the warriors are successful and the dwarf answers the wendol shall be slain and Buliwyf's name will be song in all the great halls. The warriors leave the caves and return to Rothgar's Hall.

## Chapter Eleven, The Counsel of the Dwarf Analysis

This chapter shows Buliwyf is indeed a mortal man. Although he is a hero he is also capable of feeling fear and making mistakes. Ibn Fadlan views the battles with the wendol as amazing feats of courage. Due to his impression of Buliwyf and the other warriors, Ibn Fadlan is surprised to hear the dwarf say Buliwyf has not acted like a true hero. The reader may also be confused about the dwarf's meaning. What the dwarf means is Buliwyf has fought against the mist monsters as an ordinary man would. Rothgar, even in his declining state, could have fought the wendol at Hurot or tried to seek out their camp. It is well known that the wendol's mother is the source of their power. Only the bravest, fiercest hero would seek out the mother in her own lair. This act is fraught with extreme danger and therefore can only be undertaken by a true hero. Mere men, like Rothgar, choose to live with the wendol attacks instead of seeking to



destroy them at the root of their power. Buliwyf's destiny is to be the true hero and to seek out the wendol's mother in the thunder caves, even if it costs him his life.

The reader may begin to notice the importance of mothers. The stone statues left behind by the wendols are of a pregnant woman. A pregnant woman is automatically considered a mother. From her springs new life, new power and she is the source of that life and power. A child can be killed and a mother will greatly suffer, but she can continue to produce more life and power. However, to kill a mother is to halt the line of creation. Children, no matter what age, are brought to their knees and rendered powerless at the death of a mother. Mothers signify life. They are a source for comfort, encouragement and strength to their young. When a mother is no longer around, a child often feels helpless and vulnerable. This is the root of what the dwarf tells Buliwyf. In order to stop the wendol, their mother must be destroyed. The wendol will still seek vengeance for their mother's death, as would any child at the loss of a mother, but they will be newly vulnerable and more easily defeated.



# Chapter Twelve, The Events of the Night Before the Attack

## Chapter Twelve, The Events of the Night Before the Attack Summary

The mist does not come the night of Buliwyf's visit to the dwarves. Rothgar hosts a great feast and the warriors take great pleasure in large quantities of mead and women. Ibn Fadlan joins in the revelry because he feels that after the amount of time he has spent with Buliwyf, he could have been born a Northman. Herger is greatly intoxicated and divulges information about the wendol's mother to Ibn Fadlan. Herger tells Ibn Fadlan she is very old and grotesque. She lives in a cave beneath the cliffs not far from Hurot. Ibn Fadlan wishes to know more about the creature but Herger cannot tell him more because no man knows more. Herger then falls into a drunken sleep.

Buliwuf approaches Ibn Fadlan and sits next to him to talk. Buliwuf talks slowly so Ibn Fadlan will understand what is being said since they have no interpreter. Buliwuf asks if Ibn Fadlan understood what the dwarf said. Ibn Fadlan says he did with Herger's help. Buliwuf counsils Ibn Fadlan to be careful and ensure he survives. Furthermore, Buliwuf says Ibn Fadlan has learned much about the Northmen. The sense of the matter is that Buliwuf wishes Ibn Fadlan to survive so he can tell the story of what has happened and of Buliwuf's heroism. Buliwuf then turns to pleasuring himself with a nearby slave girl.

## Chapter Twelve, The Events of the Night Before the Attack Analysis

This brief chapter shows the reader what takes place before warriors engage in a fierce battle. Buliwuf has been told by the dwarf he will die as a result of his encounter with the wendols' mother. He is solemn during the feast even though he tries to put on a happy face. Buliwuf has much to contemplate the night before his last battle. He must plan his course of action carefully in order to ensure his success. Buliwuf also seeks to ensure his story will live on after he is gone. The dwarf prophesies that Buliwuf's name would be sung in all the great halls but in order for this to happen, Buliwuf must find someone capable of spreading his deeds throughout the lands. Buliwuf's conversation with Ibn Fadlan serves two purposes. First, Buliwuf finds someone capable of telling his heroic tale in foreign lands and thereby spreading his greatness even farther. Secondly, the mere fact Buliwuf actively seeks out Ibn Fadlan shows the foreigner is indeed one of the Northmen. Buliwuf only approached Ibn Fadlan through Herger prior to this night. By directly approaching Ibn Fadlan, Buliwuf shows the foreigner is worthy of direct discourse with the noble warrior.



# Chapter Thirteen, The Thunder Caves

## Chapter Thirteen, The Thunder Caves Summary

Early the next morning, the warrior band departs for the thunder caves. They follow the coastline and Ibn Fadlan observes that in many places the sea and the rocks meet abruptly, resulting in a thundering sound. Ibn Fadlan rides up next to Herger and asks about the plan for the day. Herger replies they will attack the mother of the wendol in her cave and they will do so from the sea. Ibn Fadlan looks over the cliff edge and then asks if they will attack by boat. Herger says they cannot enter the caves by boat but must instead scale down the cliffs from above. Ibn Fadlan is immediately filled with intense fear at the prospect of climbing down the cliff face. He tells Herger he will not accompany the party over the cliff. Herger says if Ibn Fadlan can do this he will be a hero but Ibn Fadlan does not care to be a hero. Buliwyf says Ibn Fadlan will come along with the rest and his pronouncement seems to settle the matter. Herger tells Ibn Fadlan to look how Buliwyf rides so tall in the saddle even though he knows he will soon die. Ibn Fadlan is not heartened by this comment.

Finally Buliwyf calls for the party to halt and the men prepare to descend the cliff. Ibn Fadlan looks over the cliff's edge and feels as if he will be sick. The cliff is sheer with no hand or footholds and the waves below look tiny due to the extreme height. The warriors work to secure two lengths of rope to the cliff edge. Buliwyf then descends first. Ibn Fadlan is then told he will go next and he tries to protest. Herger tells him it is an honor to be allowed to go next and he should not argue. Ibn Fadlan remembers little about his descent except that the wind blows a man around. When he reaches the bottom of the cliff, Buliwyf says Ibn Fadlan has done well. The rest of the warriors quickly scale the cliff face until they are all gathered on a narrow ledge. Buliwyf then says they are ready to enter the cave. He instructs the men to carry their daggers in their teeth in order to leave their arms free for swimming. Ibn Fadlan is barely over his anxiety at descending the cliff and now he is greeted by new waves of anxiety at having to swim beneath the cliff. Once again, Ibn Fadlan follows Buliwyf beneath the waves until they surface in an underground cave.

Once all the warriors are assembled in the cave they launch an attack on four demons in the cave. For the first time Ibn Fadlan gets a good look at the wendol. The creatures are at once manlike in appearance and yet unlike any man Ibn Fadlan has ever seen. The creatures are short and hairy. They have large faces with prominent mouths and jaws. Their eyes are set deep in their heads with a large hairy brow. While one of the creatures dies, it makes some noises that sound faintly like speech but Ibn Fadlan is not positive the creature can actually speak. Once these four monsters are dead, the warriors advance further into the cave. At the back of the cave the group finds three more creatures bowing to another creature hiding in the shadows. Buliwyf quickly dispatches the three creatures and then moves in on the wendol's mother. Over and over again Buliwyf stabs the creature until she finally falls down dead. When Buliwyf



turns from the wendol's mother, the rest of the warriors see she managed to wound Buliwyf in the stomach.

The warriors depart the thunder caves via the land entrance which is no longer guarded by the other wendol. When the party arrives back at the horses, Ecthgow orders a stretcher to be fashioned to carry Buliwyf. At Hurot a bowl of onion soup is brought to Buliwyf but the hero refuses the broth, saying he knows he is mortally wounded. Buliwyf then speaks to Rothgar and the old king promises to provide Buliwyf with all the necessary objects for a proper burial. Assured of his funeral arrangements, Buliwyf pleases himself with a slave girl and then falls into a deep sleep. Ibn Fadlan looks on the hero and worries Buliwyf will not survive the night.

## Chapter Thirteen, The Thunder Caves Analysis

This chapter showcases the behavior of a true hero. Buliwyf accepts his fate and is now ready to finish his mission. Buliwyf's demeanor during the journey to the thunder caves is resolved and solemn. He knows what he must do and resigns himself to his fate. Although the Northmen think highly of men who die valiantly in battle, Buliwyf is still human and as such he cannot be completely at peace with his impending death. However, his concerns about death are tempered by the knowledge he will live on as a hero in the minds of men. Buliwyf takes pains to ensure he will be remembered and receive a proper burial. Before he can find comfort in his dying moments, he asks Ibn Fadlan to tell his tale far and wide and asks Rothgar to provide a proper funeral. Buliwyf continues to appear the strong hero by pleasuring a woman and telling jokes. From the beginning to the end, Buliwyf does not waver from his chosen course. He exhibits all the attitudes and actions required of a true hero.

The death of the wendol's mother is anti-climatic. What the reader assumes will be a ferocious battle is actually over in a matter of minutes. The she-creature does not put up much of a fight other than to stab Buliwyf in the stomach. The whole attack in the thunder caves seems too easy and makes the reader wonder why Buliwyf did not pursue this course of action from the beginning. However, knowing Buliwyf is fated to die at the hands of the wendol's mother, the reader can assume his hesitation is the result of not wishing to hasten his death.





# Chapter Fourteen, The Death Throes of the Wendol

## Chapter Fourteen, The Death Throes of the Wendol Summary

Ibn Fadlan falls asleep and is awakened by Herger. The remaining wendol are coming to avenge their mother's death. Ibn Fadlan takes up his sword and hurries to join the other warriors. As Ibn Fadlan stands awaiting the arrival of the mist monsters he feels no fear and is surprised to realize that for the first time the Northmen are afraid of the impending battle. A commotion behind the warriors causes Ibn Fadlan to turn around. Buliwyf is walking towards the warriors. He is very pale but he stands erect. Buliwyf's appearance awes the warriors and emboldens their spirits. Two ravens sit on Buliwyf's shoulders and he is dressed all in white. Buliwyf looks like Odin, the god of war. Buliwyf does not look at the warriors or speak but instead walks past the line of fortifications to await the approaching wendol.

The final battle with the mist monsters is fierce and many good men lose their lives. Ibn Fadlan is wounded in the shoulder but manages to slay three of the creatures. Ecgthow is beheaded and another of Buliwyf's warriors is pinned to the ground by a spear through the chest. When the battle ends the ground is strewn with dead, including several dead wendol. The villagers know the creatures will not return because they are disorganized without their mother.

Herger sees to Ibn Fadlan's wounds and as he finishes up, the body of Buliwyf is carried into the hall. Herger bursts into tears at the sight of the fallen hero and turns away. Rothgar is unable to make a speech over the dead man as is custom. Ibn Fadlan wonders if Rothgar is at a loss for words because he is upset or because he is ashamed he did not join in the battle. Wiglif makes a snide comment about Buliwyf and Ibn Fadlan challenges Rothgar's son despite his own wounds. Herger trips Ibn Fadlan and joins the battle in the foreigner's place. The herald tries to kill Herger from behind but Ibn Fadlan slays him. Rothgar comes into the hall at the commotion and begs the men to cease. Herger refuses to yield and slays Wiglif.

Of the original thirteen that journeyed to Rothgar's hall, only four remain. These four now prepare Buliwyf for burial. Herger asks for a woman to be buried with Buliwyf and a woman steps forward as a volunteer. A ship is laid out and filled with treasure and two dead horses. The woman is brought to the four warriors and each of them has sex with her, including Ibn Fadlan. Ibn Fadlan and Herger hold the rope that strangles the girl while the angel of death stabs her. Buliwyf and the girl are laid in the ship and set aflame. The boat is pushed out to sea and then night descends over the Northland.



## Chapter Fourteen, The Death Throes of the Wendol Analysis

Buliwyf's appearance as Odin at the final battle is fitting for the hero. Only those warriors whom Odin holds in his favor are admitted to Valhalla and Odin can often be a fickle god. However, Buliwyf obviously proves himself as a true hero and earns a place in the eternal battleground. At the same time, Odin is also known to appear to a group of warriors prior to battle as a sign he is on their side and their party will be victorious. The reader is not completely certain Buliwyf is the one fighting in the final battle. Perhaps Odin himself has come to aide the remaining warriors since Buliwyf is so grievously wounded. Whatever the case, Buliwyf's appearance as Odin invigorates the warriors and they are ultimately successful against the wendol.

Throughout the story, Ibn Fadlan struggles to find his place among the Northmen. After the final battle, Ibn Fadlan is truly a Northman. He battles alongside the other warriors and shares their excitement and fear. While Ibn Fadlan probably did not expect to want to become a Northman, he has indeed achieved this very thing. He is given the honored position as one of Buliwyf's men for the burial ritual. At first Ibn Fadlan finds the ritual raping and killing of a girl to be buried with a dead warrior grotesque but after so long among the Northmen he now accepts their traditions. Ibn Fadlan has grown to respect the Northmen.



# Chapter Fifteen, The Return from the North Country

## Chapter Fifteen, The Return from the North Country Summary

Ibn Fadlan spends several more weeks with the Northmen before desiring to return to his initial mission. However, his appeals to Rothgar to take his leave of the Northmen fall on deaf ears. Rothgar contrives to keep Ibn Fadlan from leaving Hurot until he finally becomes frustrated and seeks aide from Herger. Herger flatters Rothgar and tells the king that his only remaining son Wulfgar is still abroad. Herger says Wulfgar should be summoned home and that a party should be assembled to fetch the boy back. When Rothgar calls for men to form a party, Ibn Fadlan requests he be allowed to make the journey. Rothgar is unable to refuse the foreigner and so Ibn Fadlan gains passage home.

During the time it takes to prepare a boat, Herger continually asks Ibn Fadlan questions about his faith and Allah. Herger cannot understand why Ibn Fadlan places his faith in only one thing. To Herger, believing in just one thing is foolish and that is why the Northmen have several gods. Ibn Fadlan realizes he will never convert Herger and he does not wish to believe in Herger's gods either. Finally the day arrives when Ibn Fadlan departs the land of the Venden. Herger and Ibn Fadlan grip each others' shoulders in a sign of friendship and their mutual sadness at the parting. Ibn Fadlan boards the ship and watches Hurot grow smaller and smaller. There the manuscript ends abruptly.

## Chapter Fifteen, The Return from the North Country Analysis

Ibn Fadlan's honorary status as a Northmen is further evidenced by Rothgar's refusal to let the foreigner depart. However, Herger realizes Ibn Fadlan must return to his own lands and, despite their friendship, Ibn Fadlan will never be a true Northmen. Herger shows his true friendship by gaining Ibn Fadlan passage home and not trying to prevent the Arab from leaving. Herger further shows his respect for Ibn Fadlan by trying to understand the nature of Allah. Ibn Fadlan's faith is too much for Herger to comprehend and so the two agree to disagree about their faiths. The parting of Herger and Ibn Fadlan is sadder than the death of Buliwuf. Buliwuf was fated to die as a hero but the friendship between Herger and Ibn Fadlan is unexpected. The bridge created by these two men to overcome their cultural differences has been interesting to watch evolve and now the bridge is torn down. The future of both men is uncertain but the reader senses they will never see each other again.



# **Appendix: The Mist Monsters, Sources, and A Factual Note on Eaters of the Dead**

## **Appendix: The Mist Monsters, Sources, and A Factual Note on Eaters of the Dead Summary**

The first appendix discusses the real identity of the mist monsters and the many theories surrounding what they are. The possibility these creatures are actually a primitive strand of humans is considered at length. This discussion leads to an evaluation of the evolution of man and the new discoveries made about Neanderthal man.

The second appendix is a list of sources consulted by Michael Crichton during his writing of the story. The list is meant to aide the reader in his own research.

The third appendix is the most interesting. In this factual note, Crichton reveals that the story is almost wholly false. Only a small sliver of factual information is used at the very beginning of the tale and after that Crichton works to carefully mimic the speech of Ibn Fadlan. Ibn Fadlan did in fact exist but there is no evidence he spent time with the Northmen. Crichton writes the book after a bet with a friend that he could make the epic tale of Beowulf more interesting.

## **Appendix: The Mist Monsters, Sources, and A Factual Note on Eaters of the Dead Analysis**

The discussion of Neanderthal man is interesting if slightly confusing for the reader. The possibility that the mist monsters are actually humans and not monsters brings a whole new level to the story. To think Buliwyf and his warriors fight to destroy another race of man is almost deplorable. However, confrontations and feuds between various tribes is common amongst the Northmen. Arguments often broke out over which family held rights to land or over a perceived insult.

The most interesting section of the appendix is Michael Crichton's admission that the story is falsified. The reader knows mist monsters are not real but Crichton does such a magnificent job constructing his story that the reader can easily believe an Arab spent time with the Northmen. However, the reader is a little disheartened to learn he has been lied to for most of the book. The reader wonders which parts of the story are true and which are not. Despite Crichton's admission, the reader is still able to enjoy the tale and perhaps enjoy it even more. The reader marvels at Crichton's ability to seamlessly join Ibn Fadlan's short manuscript with his own ideas.



# Characters

## Ibn Fadlan

Ibn Fadlan is the narrator and author of the tale. His full and proper name is Ahmad ibn-Fadlan, ibn-al-Abbas, ibn-Rsid, ibn-Hammad. The lengthy name attests to his heritage as a Middle Easterner and their custom of identifying themselves by their ancestry. Ibn Fadlan is a member of Muhammad ibn-Sulayman's court. Ibn Fadlan works as a courtier and the tale springs from his charge to conduct himself to a neighboring town in order to teach the king there.

On his way to the neighboring kingdom, Ibn Fadlan encounters a group of Northmen or Vikings. The Northmen are called to travel even further North in order to battle a monster referred to as the wendol. As part of the Northmen's tradition, a foreigner must accompany the band and become the thirteenth warrior. Ibn Fadlan is recruited, much to his dismay, to travel with Buliwyf and his warriors to the land of King Rothgar. Ibn Fadlan is not happy about being forced to travel farther North and to abandon his original mission.

However, despite his protests Ibn Fadlan does board a boat and make the journey to Hurot Hall. Along the way Ibn Fadlan is exposed to a new climate and new ways of life. As a devout Muslim, Ibn Fadlan is often repulsed at the savage nature exhibited by the Northmen. He finds them to be filthy and uncouth. He also experiences difficulty adjusting to the cold, dank climate of the North. Although the entire endeavor seems a dismal experience for Ibn Fadlan, he soon finds he has things in common with the Northmen. Their views on life are not all that different from his own, albeit they express themselves in a less civilized manner. By the end of the story Ibn Fadlan has transformed from a nervous courtier into an honorary Viking warrior. He is accepted by the men of Buliwyf's company and enjoys many of the same privileges as they do. Even though Ibn Fadlan does not choose to stay with the Northmen, he learns a great deal about cultures outside of his own and about his own capabilities.

## Herger

Herger is one of Buliwyf's warriors. He is the only one able to easily communicate with Ibn Fadlan because he knows some basic Latin. Herger acts as guide and interpreter for Ibn Fadlan throughout most of the story. Herger often explains the strange Northmen customs or counsels Ibn Fadlan about a chosen course of action. However, Herger is not always extremely friendly. There are times when Ibn Fadlan's constant questions become tiresome and Herger refuses to answer. Ibn Fadlan slowly learns to read his friend's moods in order to avoid a brusque response to questions.

Herger also appears to be one of Buliwyf's most trusted companions. Herger often rides near Buliwyf and offers counsel during battle. Herger is a strong warrior who is very



capable with bow and arrow. He does not hesitate to engage the wendol and even appears to delight in the grotesque battles. Herger's eager attitude teaches Ibn Fadlan a great deal about the lifestyle of the Northmen. Together the two discover their cultures are not so dissimilar and despite their differences they form a strong friendship.

## Buliwyf

Buliwyf is probably considered the hero of the story. He is a younger man, very capable in battle. When Wyglif falls ill and dies, Buliwyf is the one to step forward and assume the role of leader for Wyglif's people. As their leader, it is Buliwyf who must undertake the journey to Rothgar's hall to battle the wendol. Buliwyf is often quiet in manner but he is deliberate in action. When Buliwyf finds his own homeland destroyed, he dutifully continues on his intended mission. He is an exemplary Northman. Buliwyf exalts in the thrill of battle and does not fear death at the hands of his enemies. However, he is also concerned for the welfare of his companions. Although he does not shed unnecessary tears for his fallen comrades, Buliwyf is pained by the loss of his men. His efforts to be rid of the wendol once and for all seem to double following the substantial loss of warriors. Even in his death, Buliwyf's first concern is for his warriors. He appears beside them as the figure of Odin and rallies his men to the final battle.

## Rothgar

Rothgar is the aging king of Venden. According to Herger, Rothgar is a very prideful man and it is this pride that has brought the wrath of the wendol upon him. Rothgar governs a kingdom that is growing old and lacks young able-bodied warriors to confront the nightly terrors. Rothgar is a broken man. There is something lacking within him personally that prevents him from engaging the wendol on his own or properly protecting his people. Rothgar must depend upon the strength of Buliwyf and his men to rid his lands of the mist monsters. Rothgar is even incapable of controlling his own sons. The youngest, Wulfgar, is sent to fetch Buliwyf but also leaves his father's kingdom for his own safety. Wiglif, another of Rothgar's sons, has already killed three of his brothers in his desire to obtain the throne. Rothgar faces two evils at home and is unable to battle either one.

## The Wendol

The wendol, or mist monsters, are the terrible creatures which plague Rothgar's kingdom. These creatures are hairy and smelly and extremely ferocious. They come only under cover of night and only when the mists cover the land. On several occasions Ibn Fadlan wonders if they are not actually human. When the wendol appear in the form of the Korgon dragon, it is easy to see they are indeed men of some sort. However, when Buliwyf and the warriors confront the monsters in the thunder caves, it is not easy to distinguish them as men. The wendol are ruled by an old hag surrounded by snakes.



She is referred to by the Northmen as the mother of the wendols and until she is killed the monsters will continue to roam Rothgar's kingdom.

## Wulfgar

Wulfgar is one of Rothgar's sons. He is sent by Rothgar to fetch Buliwyf to battle the wendol. Wulfgar is also fleeing his father's land for his own safety. His brother, Wiglif, has already murdered three of their brothers and seeks to obtain the throne by any means possible. Once Wulfgar delivers his message and it is clear Buliwyf will undertake the journey, Wulfgar remains in Wyglif's lands instead of returning immediately home.

## Wiglif

There are two Wiglifs in the story. This one, spelled with an "i", is one of Rothgar's sons. He is on a mission to obtain his father's throne by any means necessary. He has already killed three of his own brothers and is plotting to overthrow his father. Wiglif is wary of Buliwyf's presence and plots to kill Buliwyf too. His plot is discovered and overthrown. Once this happens, Wiglif is not mentioned again in the story.

## The Wendol's Mother

The mother of the wendol lives beneath the cliffs in the thunder caves. She is a hideous creature. Not only does she look like the other wendol but she surrounds herself with snakes, many of which seem to grow from her head. The only chance Buliwyf and his men have at overcoming the mist monsters is to destroy the mother. They seem to draw a mysterious power from her and once she is disposed of the warriors are better able to rid Rothgar's kingdom of the rest of the monsters.

## Wyglif

This is the second Wyglif. This one, spelled with a "y", is the sickly ruler of the Northmen living near the Volga. Wyglif has been removed from his hall to suffer his ailments in a private hut. This is the custom of the Northmen. Since it has been determined there is no hope of recovery, Buliwyf hovers near Wyglif's throne, ready to take over once the old ruler passes on. Wyglif does indeed die and Ibn Fadlan observes the Northmen's traditional burial.

## The Caliph

The Caliph is Ibn Fadlan's ruler. The Caliph is the one who charges Ibn Fadlan with the task of traveling North to the King of the Saqaliba. Ibn Fadlan is not high in the Caliph's

esteem and is given his task as the result of a dalliance with the wife of one of the Caliph's friends.





# Objects/Places

## Runding

Runding is Buliwyf's sword. When the warriors arrive at Yatlam, Buliwyf enters one house and comes back out with Runding. Apparently the sword has been there all along and Buliwyf knew where to find it.

## The Thunder Caves

The Thunder Caves are caves in the cliffs that can be reached either by land or by water and are the home of the wendol's mother. The land entrance is guarded by the wendols and the sea entrance is very risky. Buliwyf and his men enter via the sea entrance. They must swim against the sucking tide beneath the cliff in order to reach the caves. Once inside, the waves crashing outside sound like thunder and this is how the caves were named.

## Hurot

Hurot is King Rothgar's magnificent hall. The hall sits high on a hill with no apparent means of defense and is a very extravagant structure. The wendol are able to attack the hall because of its lack of defenses and are said to attack Hurot because the building was constructed due to Rothgar's vanity.

## The Desert of Dread

The Desert of Dread is the name given to a stretch of land that borders the wendols' territory. Dogs and horses refuse to tread in this area because they sense the horribleness of the mist creatures.

## The Ibn Fadlan Manuscript

The Ibn Fadlan Manuscript is a historical document. Michael Crichton did not entirely make up the manuscript or its author. However, Crichton does note the manuscript material makes up only a bit of the first few chapters and then he takes over, writing in the same style as Ibn Fadlan. Ibn Fadlan did not actually travel with the Vikings and there is no known record of Buliwyf or any person resembling him.



## The Burial Ceremony

In the Viking tradition when a warrior dies, there is an elaborate ceremony which must be conducted. The body of the deceased must be lain out under cover for the duration of the preparations. A boat is built in which all manner of items for the afterlife are secured: food, weapons, horses, items from the dead man's home. Then a woman must volunteer to die alongside the warrior. She first visits each man who was a close friend of the dead warrior and each man takes his turn having sex with her. She is then led into the hut which houses the body and the Angel of Death stabs her while two warriors strangle her with a cord wrapped about her neck. The two bodies are then laid in the boat and the entire vessel is put to flame.

## Bagdad

Ibn Fadlan is originally from Bagdad or the City of Peace. In Bagdad he serves as a courtier for the Caliph and it is from here he is dispatched on his mission to teach the leader of the Saqaliba.

## Yatlam

Yatlam is Buliwyf's hometown. When the war party stops to see Buliwyf's family, they find the town burnt to destruction.

## The Glowworm Dragon Korgon

After the first attack by the wendol comes a second attack by the Korgon. When Ibn Fadlan first inquires about the nature of this beast he is told it is a fierce fire-breathing dragon. As such the warriors and the buildings are doused with water in the hopes of preventing everything from going up in flames. When the Glowworm Dragon Korgon finally makes its appearance, Ibn Fadlan sees it is not really a dragon at all. Instead the "dragon" is made up of men riding on horseback and carrying torches.

## Trelburg

Trelburg is a military camp the warrior party stops at during their journey North. There are few women or children living in this fortress city. The encampment is located on a point of land created by the joining of two rivers. The town is encircled by a wall. A second wall inside the first protects the town itself. The long houses are arranged in groups of four to make a total of sixteen houses. Each house has only one entrance/exit and each entrance faces a different direction. The doors of the houses are very low so that one man can remain inside and cut off the heads of intruders.

# Themes

## Fictional Non-Fiction

There appears to be a growing trend in writing of authors blatantly intermingling fact and fiction. Of course, practically every story ever written holds some grain of truth even when it is touted as fiction. The question then becomes whether the author is responsible for revealing the amount of truth in his supposedly "true" fiction work.

Michael Crichton at first sets out to present his tale of Ibn Fadlan and his journey among the Northmen as a completely true account. The book begins with a lengthy introduction of the Ibn Fadlan manuscript. This discussion leaves the reader feeling certain the text they are about to read is factual and not fictionalized. Crichton continues his ploy throughout the book by adding footnotes to explain various Arabic and Viking customs and sayings. By all appearances, Crichton has conducted an immense amount of research in order to produce the most realistic and factual account possible. Crichton even provides a list of sources at the end of the book which the reader fully believes he can consult for his own research. However, at the very tail end of the book is "A Factual Note." In this short section Crichton reveals the reason he undertook the writing of this book: in order to prove to a close friend that a particular work of literature is not boring. Crichton decided to formulate his own telling of the Beowulf legend and the result is *Eaters of the Dead*.

While certain elements of the book, the wendol in particular, suggest the fictionality of the tale, there is no reason for the reader to suspect an Arab could not have become involved with a group of Northmen. Even the wendol can be explained in a realistic manner if the reader so chooses. Ibn Fadlan remarks these "monsters" are human in appearance at times. There is also the would-be usurper, Wiglif, to consider. The reader can put these two facts together and wonder if perhaps the wendol are not actually a manifestation of Wiglif's desire to hold his father's throne. There are certainly elements in the tale that lend themselves to suggest a non-fictional story. Crichton manages to make the best use out of these realistic elements and weaves them masterfully into a fictionalized book.

Although, some readers may at first feel Crichton has played a cruel trick on them, the reality of the situation is that Crichton has been brutally honest with his readers. He does not end the book and allow the reader to believe Ibn Fadlan really journeyed North with Buliwyf. Instead he sets the record straight and tells his readers how the story came about. Ibn Fadlan and his manuscript are real, but the journey with the Northmen does not appear in Ibn Fadlan's account. Buliwyf is of course Beowulf and the wendol is another name for the monster Grendel. Michael Crichton has found perhaps the best way to present a fictional tale as non-fiction: to be honest about his endeavor. Many authors might have left the reader believing the book had been improperly shelved in the store, but Crichton is honest and up front about his work. His openness enhances



the reader's enjoyment of the book because he is able to relax and participate in Ibn Fadlan's fanciful adventure.

## Appreciation for Other Cultures

Two cultures one might never suspect to intermingle, particularly in the year 922 A.D., are the Arabs and the Northmen. These two cultures seem worlds apart from one another. One pictures arid, deserts when thinking of the Middle East and this picture does not coincide with the cold, misty landscape of Scandinavia. Besides the disparity in climates, the social cultures of each area do not easily lend themselves to cross pollination. The reader pictures the Arabs as a more socially advanced culture complete with tradesmen, intellectuals, and "modern" conveniences. At the other end of the spectrum stands the Northmen or Viking culture. Vikings are typically regarded as savage pillagers not given to refined ways. However, Ibn Fadlan's account of his time in Buliwyl's company illustrates how these opposite cultures can co-exist and even exhibit some similarities.

Coming from the more civilized Middle East, Ibn Fadlan is appalled by what he sees while traveling with the Northmen. The Northmen are often uncouth and prone to dirty behaviors. Ibn Fadlan notes the Northmen relieve themselves wherever they see fit and take enjoyment from a woman in plain view of others. The Northmen's barbarous ways offend Ibn Fadlan's cultured senses. However, he also seems slightly intrigued by the rough behavior of his new companions. Ibn Fadlan spends much of his time observing the mannerisms and traditions of the Northmen. His limited ability to converse with Buliwyl and his men permits Ibn Fadlan the luxury of intensely studying the warriors. As he watches, Ibn Fadlan notes there are actually similarities between the Northmen and his own culture.

Ibn Fadlan realizes that although the Northmen have a more animalistic way of living, they also observe certain rituals similar to the Arabs. Both cultures have a prescribed ritual for the burial of their dead. The death of a warrior is counted a great honor if the warrior falls in battle. The Arabs conduct their burial rituals without the brutal murder of a woman to be buried with the deceased but this is only a matter of personal preference. Ibn Fadlan comes to realize each culture holds the same values but upholds these values in different ways. Neither culture is right or wrong in their observance of rituals or personal practices. By the end of the story, this is the greatest lesson Ibn Fadlan learns. At the beginning of the tale, Ibn Fadlan is to journey to a neighboring kingdom in order to teach the king there. When he is commissioned to accompany the Northmen on their journey and forced to abandon his original mission, Ibn Fadlan thinks he has been treated unfairly. However, the lessons he learns about the culture of the Northmen will now prove useful as he resumes his original task. Ibn Fadlan has learned a great deal about the ways of other people and can now transmit this information to others, thereby increasing the knowledge of his own people.



## True Heroics

Many readers of *Eaters of the Dead* will immediately realize Crichton has found a new way to tell a very old story. Ibn Fadlan's tale is based on the epic poem of Beowulf. Reading Beowulf, in whole or part, is usually part of standard English curricula, making the story at least partially familiar to a wide audience. Hollywood has also taken a recent interest in Beowulf and several movie adaptations have surfaced. Die-hard fans of the epic poem will also recognize Hollywood capitalized on Crichton's novel in *The 13th Warrior* starring Antonio Banderas. Each of these renditions follows the same basic story line but each one puts a slightly different spin on the role of Beowulf. Undeniably Beowulf, or Buliwyf, is the hero of the tale but the reader may wonder why he is the one who must defeat the wendol and not Rothgar. After all, it is Rothgar's kingdom that is under attack and not Buliwyf's.

Scholars have spent years debating Rothgar's role in the story. Some view the king as old and feeble and that is why Buliwyf must come battle the monsters. Others say Rothgar is a coward unwilling to meet the fiend who plagues his territory. Crichton combines both of these views. Rothgar's kingdom is said to be peopled by mostly aged men, women and children. The king does not have the resources to gather a warrior band together and confront the evil mist monsters. In this sense, Rothgar acts prudently by sending a messenger to fetch Buliwyf. Buliwyf is a strong young man with a large band of warriors at his disposal. He has not yet been appointed king following Wiglaf's death and so cannot claim that engaging a foreign battle will put him in unnecessary peril. At the same time, Crichton notes Rothgar suffers from vanity. He has built Hurot in an open area without seeing to the proper defenses of his hall. Hurot serves as a show piece of Rothgar's bounty but also stands as a beacon to his foolishness. By building such an extravagant structure, Rothgar has put himself at the mercy of others who now seek to see him destroyed.

Some readers may question why Buliwyf chooses to accept the request to battle the wendol. To the modern reader, Buliwyf is engaging in a fight which is not his and he has no business entering. However, according to Northmen tradition it is an honor to fight such battles. To refuse Rothgar's summons would mark Buliwyf as a coward and one not worthy of entering Valhalla when he dies. The heroism of Buliwyf's decision can be seen when he appears at the final battle dressed like Odin. Clearly the Northmen's god has found favor with Buliwyf and lends his support to the warriors so they can finally defeat the wendol. Buliwyf dies a hero's death in the confrontation with the wendol but as such he is accorded the right to a hero's burial. Buliwyf has achieved what every Northmen hopes to obtain: he has died in battle and not quietly in his bed. On the other hand, the reader can safely assume Rothgar will not find death shrouded in Odin's costume and he will not receive the same heroic burial rites as Buliwyf. Rothgar chooses to build a magnificent hall to show off his wealth and greatness but he does so at the expense of his own legend. The Northmen care not for great halls but for great warriors. Rothgar is not a great warrior and does not show true heroism. Buliwyf, on the other hand, accepts the challenge of battling a monster in a fight not his own and loses his life in the process. Buliwyf is a great example of the values of the Northmen. In each



rendition of the Beowulf tale, Beowulf defeats the monsters and dies in battle. There is no other way for the story to end. As a true hero, Beowulf must die a hero's death and the only way he can do that is to take on a challenge greater than himself and face it with uncompromising will and strength. In this way Beowulf earns Odin's favor and is granted entrance to the warriors heaven of Valhalla.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is told in the first person. The narrator and author is Ibn Fadlan who asserts his authenticity by using phrases like "I saw with my own eyes." Similarly, Ibn Fadlan is quick to note when he has simply been told of an occurrence and not actually witnessed it himself. Ibn Fadlan is rather open with his thoughts and feelings as he travels and interacts with the Northmen. He comments on his feelings towards the Northmen's odd customs and notes his displeasure with their lack of proper hygiene. Because of Ibn Fadlan's candid dialogue with the reader, the reader is quickly able to gain a strong sense of the Northmen's way of life. The reader is also able to become a part of the story as he identifies with Ibn Fadlan's nervousness at being a part of the warrior party. The reader is scared to scale the cliffs to the Thunder Caves and is just as anxious as the narrator while awaiting the arrival of the wendol. Ibn Fadlan's first hand account draws the reader swiftly into the story and allows the reader to become the fourteenth member of the warrior band.

## Setting

The story begins in the Middle East, probably near what is now modern day Iraq since Ibn Fadlan hails from the city of Bagdad. Ibn Fadlan quickly moves from the Middle East to what he calls "the North Country," or the equivalent of modern day Scandinavia. The story takes place long before modern conveniences and modes of travel. Camels and horses carry Ibn Fadlan from his homeland into the cold North. Along his journey Ibn Fadlan stays in a variety of villages, most of which he terms dirty and sub-human. The terrain he travels is often inhospitable and differs greatly from his warm climate. Ibn Fadlan struggles continually to adjust to the rain, the cold, and the constant darkness.

Despite the difficulties Ibn Fadlan experiences trying to adjust to the Northmen's climate, he eventually begins to find the country beautiful and fascinating. One can travel a short distance and find another climate all together. Ibn Fadlan witnesses beautiful hill country with flowing rivers. He also journeys into a misty, marshy landscape that sends chills through his bones. Ibn Fadlan is taken beneath the waves of the sea to the Thunder Caves. The Thunder Caves are one of the images that astound him the most. These caverns beneath the cliffs are accessed by land or by water. The caves fill with water to a point and the sound of the waves crashing outside creates the thunder. The changing landscape creates the perfect setting for an adventure chasing monsters. The mists and darkness combine to fill the reader with a sense of apprehension. There is also a little mystery created by the landscape. Since the wendol only appear on nights when the mists come, does that mean they could possibly be humans and not monsters? The reader is constantly challenged by the changing landscape to decide the true nature of these fierce beasts.





## Language and Meaning

The language of the book is pretty straightforward and easy to understand. Any passages that may have been written in either Arabic or the language of the Northmen have been translated by the author or Ibn Fadlan. The reader does not have to ponder over the meaning of words because he is told what is happening and what is being said in modern English. However, Ibn Fadlan does not present his tale in a completely methodical or textbook fashion. The reader can sense Ibn Fadlan's sense of awe and anxiety from his succinct descriptions of action and places. Ibn Fadlan has the distinct habit of proclaiming the authenticity of what he experiences by stating, "this I saw with my own eyes." The reader then believes Ibn Fadlan is relating the truth and can better visualize the event as it happens.

Ibn Fadlan does not waste time with poetic devices or expansive descriptions. He states what he sees and how he feels about what he encounters in succinct descriptions. In many ways his re-telling of his journey strongly mirrors the Northmen. The Northmen are not disposed to great speeches or displays of warmth. The Northmen live in a harsh and unforgiving climate. The people of this land can be just as harsh and unforgiving. Their lives cannot stop to spend days bewailing the loss of a friend. Work and life must continue on if they are to survive. In fact, most of the Northmen do not even know how to write and are repulsed by Ibn Fadlan's ability to "make words" in the dirt with a stick. Because of this concise manner of existence, the reader immediately knows what is going on and what the speaker thinks about what is happening. The reader does not waste time sifting through flowery language to grasp the meaning of the story. There are no hidden meanings in the story to understand. Ibn Fadlan and the other warriors are point blank about their mission and the reasons for undertaking the battling of the wendol. Each new event is explained either briefly by Ibn Fadlan or by the author in a footnote. In this manner the reader is free to engage in the story without spending extra time wading through difficult to comprehend descriptions. The reader immediately understands and partakes of each event because understanding is clearly provided.

## Structure

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, an introduction, an appendix, a list of sources, and a factual note from the author. Each chapter is marked by a title but without any numbers. The chapter title gives an indication of what the chapter is about. The introduction provides background on the Ibn Fadlan Manuscript. The manuscript is the basis of the story. The appendix talks about the wendol and the possibility these creatures are in fact a surviving strand of Neanderthal man. The reader can find a list of sources from which Michael Crichton worked to complete his tale. The reader may be able to locate some of these sources for themselves and engage in some more in-depth research about Ibn Fadlan and the Northmen. In the factual note from the author, Michael Crichton discusses how he came to write this book and the truth regarding the fictionality of the tale.





## Quotes

"They are the filthiest race that God ever created. They do not wipe themselves after going to stool, or wash themselves after nocturnal pollution, any more than if they were wild asses." Chapter 3, p. 46.

'You Arabs,' he said, 'must be a stupid lot. You take your most beloved and revered man and cast him into the ground to be devoured by creeping things and worms. We, on the other hand, burn him in a twinkling, so that instantly, without a moment's delay, he enters into Paradise.' Chapter 3, p. 58.

"These Northmen are by their own accounting the best sailors in the world, and I saw much love of the oceans and waters in their demeanor." Chapter 5, p. 74.

"He made this reply: 'There are things that no man can conquer, and no sword can kill, and no fire can burn, and such things are in the forests.'" Chapter 5, p. 84.

"But I perceived, that he was not greatly surprised. Yet it is true that Buliwyf was seldom surprised by any thing. Such was his role as leader of the warriors and hero to them." Chapter 6, p. 103.

"I saw it to be the torso of a pregnant female. There was no head, no arms, and no legs; only the torso with a greatly swollen belly and, above that two pendulous swollen breasts." Chapter 7, pp. 119-20.

'Yet the chiefs of the Northmen in all the kingdoms, even in Norway, have always been prepared for the return of the black mist. All of our towns and our fortresses are protected and defended from the land. Since the time of the father of my father's father, our peoples have thus acted, and never have we seen the black mist. Now it has returned.' Chapter 8, pp. 138-9.

"Of the manner of thrusting, these women are noisy and energetic, and of such odor that I was obliged to stop my breath for the duration; also they are given to bucking and twisting, scratching and biting, so that a man may be thrown from his mount, as the Northmen speak of it. For myself I accounted the whole business more pain than pleasure." Chapter 9, p. 161.

"Soon, then, from out of the mist the horsemen emerged, black shapes with raised torches, black steeds hissing and charging, and the battle was joined." Chapter 10, p. 184.

"In my society," I said, "we have a saying which is: 'Thank Allah, for in his wisdom he put death at the end of life, and not at the beginning.'" Chapter 11, p. 204.

"Now I joined in the general revelry, for I felt as one of them, having spent much time in their company, or so it seemed. Indeed, that night I felt I had been born a Northman." Chapter 12, pp. 225-6.



"And then I heard a commotion behind me, and upon my turning, I saw this: Buliwyf, pale as the mist itself, garbed in white and bound in his wounds, stood erect upon the land of the kingdom of Rothgar. And on his shoulders sat two black ravens, one to each side; and at this sight the Northmen screamed of his coming, and they raised their weapons into the air and howled for the battle." Chapter 14, pp. 254-5.



## Topics for Discussion

In A Factual Note on Eaters of the Dead, Crichton remarks he was prompted to write this book after a friend decided to teach a class on books that should no longer be taught. This friend felt Beowulf is an outdated and boring text to which Crichton disagreed. If you have read Beowulf, discuss your feelings on the text. Do you side with Crichton or with his friend? Why?

Compare and contrast the novel to the movie, The 13th Warrior.

Compare and contrast Eaters of the Dead to the text of Beowulf. Which is more exciting? Do you agree or disagree with the license Crichton took in writing his own book?

How do you feel about Ibn Fadlan? Is he a reliable source of historical information?

Discuss the effects of combining some factual information with fiction. Does the author have a duty to tell his audience not all the information contained in the novel is factual or is this automatically assumed when reading fiction or even "historical fiction?"

Consider the wendol for a moment. What do you think they really are? Monsters? Un-evolved humans? Or is there possibly a connection between the wendol and the usurpers living under Rothgar's roof?

What is the reader to make of all the footnotes in the text given that Crichton specifically pronounces them works of fiction?