

Volga *Bulghāria*: The First Muslim State of Northern Eurasia (922-1236 CE)

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to provide to its readers the glimpse of the very first Muslim State of Northern Eurasia, right from its emergence in 10th century to its fall in 13th century. It provides information about the people of the middle Volga region who volunteered to accept Islam in the beginning of 10th century, in spite of the fact that the area was almost cut off from the main course of Islamic scenario. The paper also discusses about the social as well as political situations persistent in the region at the beginning of 10th century and the development of the people of the region along with the development of their state in the Islamic centuries. Attempt has been made to provide information about all the aspects of the Bulghār Muslim society, i.e., polity, economy and religion. As a whole, the paper briefly covers all the three centuries of Bulghār Muslim society up to the Mongol onslaught in 1236 CE, when Volga Bulghāria was ultimately defeated and assimilated into Mongol Empire, later known as Golden Horde.

Introduction

Volga Bulghāria is a historic state of Northern Eurasia that existed between 10th and 13th centuries around the confluence of Volga and Kama River in what is now the Russian Federation. Today, Republic of Tatarstan and Republic of Chuvashia are considered to be the descendants of Volga Bulghāria in terms of territory and ethnicity. First-hand information on Volga Bulghāria is rather sparse. As no authentic Bulghār records have survived, most of our information comes from contemporary Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Russian sources. Some information is provided by the excavations that have been and are being carried out in the region.

The region, at the beginning of 10th century was inhabited mainly by Bulghārs of Turkic origin, who migrated to this area in the middle of 8th century, from the land of Khazars in the South, after the first great defeat of the Khazars by the Arabs in 736 AD.¹ Alongside Bulghārs, the region included some other tribes such as Central Asian components *Esegels/Chigils*, Turko-

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Oghur *Suwars/Savirs*, Turkicized *Bashkirs*, North Caucasian *Bersuls/Barsils*, Finnish *Burtas/Burdas*, Alano-Khazarian *Barandjars* and the Finno-Ugric people.² The region was surrounded in the north by tribes of *Visu* and *Yura*, who were the Finnic people, dwelling in the lands surrounded by three lakes — *Lagoda*, *Onega* and *Beloe*.³ In south, the region was surrounded by *Khazars*, in the east by *Kipchak*⁴ and *Oguz*⁵ tribes and in the west by Scandinavian *Rus'*.

Spread of Islam and the Consolidation of State

In the early 9th century, Khazars overpowered the Bulghārs and forced them into submission.⁶ Bulghārs became both politically as well as economically dependent upon the Khazar Khāqānate because the Khazars had their control over the major trade arteries of the whole region.⁷ Like all other chiefs of the tribes of the region, the chief of Bulghārs, became a vassal of the Khazars, paying tribute with furs from each household and having his son, as the symbol of obedience, as hostage in the court of Khazar Khāqān.⁸ Moreover, with the motive of loot and plunder, the Khazars made repeated incursions into the region without having any regard for sovereignty and integrity of its people.⁹ The Khazars were thus unable to adapt to the aspirations of their neighbors and the tendency to break free from their domination was growing inside the tribes of the region, particularly among the Bulghārs.¹⁰

With the activation of Volga-Baltic pass and initiation of a regular caravan route to Khwarizm by the end of 9th century, the power of Bulghārs increased.¹¹ Trading activities and participation in world trade contributed not only to the economic growth, but also to the military and political power of Bulghārs.¹² Bulghārs were enriched by this and their authority was thus strengthening. Meanwhile, Almush bin Shilki, the chief of Bulghārs, planned to confront the Khazars in order to gain independence. He thus decided to consolidate the tribes of the region under his power.¹³ But, for this consolidation, an ideological union of different tribes was needed. Ibn Rusta, in his 'Book of Noble Treasures', which was compiled between 903 and 907 AD, records that the chief of Bulghārs and his family and nobles were Muslim. He also mentions that most of the people in the region adhere to Islam; they have mosques and elementary schools in their villages.¹⁴ It is thus clear that Islam was already, if not fully established, very much present in the region. As Islam was already prevalent throughout the region, the choice of Islam for this unification was predestined not only by the affinity with Islam, but also by the political situation as a whole. Active

trading contacts of Volga region with Central Asian countries, like Khwarizm and Sassanid Empire, also played a decisive role in this choice.¹⁵

Thus, as far as the Volga Bulghāria is concerned, at the beginning of the 10th century, the situation was ripe for the acceptance of Islam not just as a faith of certain groups of the population, but as an official religion essential in the process of the unification of the State. Out of the separate tribes and tribal groups, a distinct nation was about to be born. Ethno-politically the Bulghārs represented a compact but militarily well-organized clan.¹⁶ Gradually, by subjugating other tribes of the region, they strengthened their authority and expanded their possessions. Thus, the name of the Bulghārs was spread from the ruling people to all subjugated tribes of the region.¹⁷ Almush became the *Yaltawar* (ruler) of the Bulghār state, and his decision to adopt Islam as state religion, had a catalytic effect on the process of consolidation and centralization in his lands.¹⁸ The spread of Islam among the Bulghārs is thus certainly connected with the process of consolidation of different tribes under the helm of the Bulghārs, headed by Almush. The goal to gain independence from the Khazar Khāqānate was the most important political motive behind this consolidation.¹⁹ Thus Islam became the banner for this independence struggle of Volga Bulghārs.

Embassy to the Caliph and Delegation of *Ibn Fadlan*

The dynamic ruler *Almush* then initiated an active diplomatic policy; aiming to create an alliance against Khazar Khāqānate.²⁰ He sent *Abdullah ibn Bashtu*,²¹ as an embassy with letter to Abbasid Caliph *Ja'far al-Muqtadir* (908-930 AD). In the spring of 921 AD, Abdullah ibn Bashtu, arrived at Baghdad court as the envoy of *Almush*, the ruler of the people of North, to Caliph Ja'far al-Muqtadir.²² The crux of the letter was to convey to the Volga Bulghāria, the teachers of the Faith, in order to instruct him (*Almush bin Shilki*), in the laws of Islam and to build for him a mosque, in which there would be a *mehrab* (pulpit), from where he, would, on behalf of the Caliph, deliver *khutbah* (sermon) for his own country and for all the provinces of his domain, *Almush* also requested the Caliph to build for him a fortress, wherein he could seek shelter from other kings, his adversaries.²³ *Almush* signed this letter by the name 'al-Hasan', his Muslim name, having already adopted Islam.²⁴

At this time there were considerable Muslim communities in Volga Bulghāria. In *Almush's* headquarters, there was special Muslim clerical staff, including a *muezzin*, a wooden mosque has been built for them to pray in.²⁵ Thus the request for delegation from Baghdad Caliphate was only for the contribution to the diplomatic recognition of the Volga *Bulghāria* as a Muslim

state, giving it a powerful impulse to spread Islam officially among the Bulghār tribes and opening up a new country for the civilized world and expanding the Muslim Ecumene as far as the middle Volga region.²⁶

After much consideration at the Baghdad Court, Caliph's consent was granted. The delegation had to be dispatched with the view to bless, on behalf of the Commander of the Righteous, the official reception of Islam by the Volga Bulghārs and fulfill other requests of their ruler.²⁷ The official task of delegation, prompted by the letter of Almush began and the delegation left from Baghdad to Volga Bulghāria. The delegation was sent by way of Central Asia, a better organized route than that via the Caucasus, and avoiding the Khazars.²⁸ The main members of the delegation included Ahmad ibn Fadlan, secretary to the delegation; *Susam ar-Rāsi*, caliph's ambassador; the unnamed brother of *Rāsi* and two Turkish servants, Baris Saqlabi (a slave of the governor of Khurasan) and Tekeen Turki.²⁹ In the early summer of 922 AD, the Caliph's delegation arrived at its destination and the ruler himself met them at the distance of two *farsahs* (about 12 kilometers) from his quarters, dismounted his horse and prostrated himself before the Caliph's messengers, saying 'praises to *Allah* the Almighty, the All Powerful'. Following this, says Ibn Fadlan, he showered the delegation with silver *dirhams* and ordered his servants to put up *yurtas* (nomad tents) for the members of the delegation, where these important guests were at last able to take rest after their long journey.³⁰

Four days passed, since the arrival when, a public ceremony was organized to accord honor to the official guests which started with the hoisting of the national flags of two countries and amongst a huge congregation of people; the Caliph's letter was read aloud by Ibn Fadlan that was translated by an interpreter in the local language.³¹ During the recital of the caliph's message every one present in the gathering kept standing after which the hail *Allah-u-Akbar* was voiced so resoundingly that in the words of Ibn Fadlan, 'the earth trembled'.³² At the end, *dirhams* were showered, as a mark of respect, upon Almush and his queen by Ibn Fadlan who also presented them the gift articles of scents, robes, pearls, etc and the ceremony finished with a kingly feast.³³ Meanwhile the ruler of the Bulghārs took in honor of Caliph the Islamic name of Ja'far ibn Abdullah and changed his kingly title to that of *Emir*.³⁴ Thus, the official acceptance of Islam by the king of the Volga Bulghārs from the hands of the Caliph of the time was consummated as well as the formal establishment of the diplomatic liaisons between Volga Bulghāria and the Baghdad Caliphate but the public adoption of the faith by the tribes of Volga Bulghāria was still about two months away.

Soon the time came when the *Emir* ordered his subjects to convene at his summer residence on the banks of the Dzvshir River, where the public conversion to Islam was to take place.³⁵ Unfortunately, the description of this memorable event is missing from the account of Ibn Fadlan. Sometime around August 922 CE, the grand event of public adoption of the faith by the tribes of Volga-Bulghāria took place. The majority of the Volga Bulghār population accepted Islam and their faith became dominant in their country.³⁶ Thus Volga Bulghāria officially accepted Islam in 922 CE, in the presence of huge delegation from the Caliph of Baghdad, approximately 70 years before the Russians adopted Christianity as their official religion. Islam had been recognized as the state religion by the then Bulghār state, causing their culture to be greatly influenced by that of the Muslim Middle East.

Volga *Bulghāria* as a Muslim State (922-1236 CE)

The year 922 CE is thus commonly accepted for the official arrival of Islam in the region. Gradually, Volga Bulghāria began to get features of the typical Muslim state as *Shari'ah* replaced the Turkic common law.³⁷ Along with the introduction of Islamic tenets came a sharp increase in literacy.³⁸ Mosques were built, *maktabs* and *madrasas* were opened; Bulghār *Ulama* improved the education in the large centers of the Muslim world in the cities of Central Asia, Iran and Iraq.³⁹ All these factors greatly improved the relations of Volga Bulghāria with their neighbors and rest of the Islamic world. Their traditional centers, very soon after 922 CE, evolved into settled towns and cities.⁴⁰ The region now became part of the cultural sphere embraced by the more advanced civilizations of Khwarizm, Persia, the Arab Middle East and Spain. So far the Turks had played a minor role in the Islamic world, and Volga Bulghāria was one of the first Turkic states having all the components and potential of a highly developed urban culture.⁴¹

Bulghārs established the capital city of *Bilyār*, also called Great Bulghār and its foundation was laid at the same place where the Bulghār ruler Almush summoned his subjects for the popular conversion to Islam in the summer of 922 and where the Islamic history of Volga Bulghāria and its Islamic Civilization started in earnest.⁴² It emerged as the center around which the gathering of the Bulghār lands was completed during the 10th century.⁴³ The site of *Bilyār* and its archeological findings has provided scholars with the most far-reaching insight into the ancient history of Volga Bulghāria. Archeological data shows that the city of *Bilyār*, from its very foundation in the 930 CE, had a spacious kingly compound with the main mosque built of wood,

the city itself was surrounded by wooden walls, with entrance arches up to ten meters wide with huge square watch towers.⁴⁴ Thus, in a mere eight years since the Caliph's delegation left Volga Bulghāria, there was a palace, a formidable fortress and a mosque, from which the ruler could address his subjects on behalf of the Caliph.

The Bulghār State developed a social structure of its own. Sources tell us that *Bulghār* rulers had a dynasty; their leader was known as *Yaltawar* at the beginning of the 10th Century. But after the adoption of Islam, this title was changed to *Emir*. It is not possible to reconstruct the upper part of the hierarchy from the sources, but the rulers of single areas and towns were given the title *Bek* (prince), the noblemen of military and state were referred to as 'yori/churi' and the clergymen were addressed by special titles as *Qadis*, *Faqhis* and *Khatibs*.⁴⁵ Arab and Persian authors speak of the Bulghār campaigns against their neighbors as *Jihad*. Al-Garnati reports the regular campaigning of the Bulghār ruler northward on the pagans to make them pay *Kharaj* –tributes.⁴⁶ European sources do not ignore this topic either. Preachers from this region extended their efforts and influence into Siberian region and as a result Islam was professed by the tribes of Siberia. All together the ideas of *Dawah* and the *Jihad* were quite popular in the Bulghār culture, particularly with the military noblemen, among whom the cult of the Holy Knight 'Ali' was widespread and the heroic epics of the Turks was redone in the Muslim spirit.⁴⁷ It evidently reflects that Bulghārs had military and political conflicts with the enemy under the banner of faith. All these facts not only consolidated the Bulghār population, but so defined the Sunni/Orthodox fundamentals of their ritual and theological practices.⁴⁸

Volga Bulghāria gained more political strength towards the second half of the 10th century by encompassing the regions and the people which for several centuries were tributaries of the Khazars.⁴⁹ The weakened Khazars, because of the Kievan onslaughts, failed to maintain their national integrity and their *Khāqānate* was ultimately defeated by the Kievan prince Sviatoslav in 969 CE.⁵⁰ Their Empire got liquidated and the nation disappeared almost without leaving a trace and with this Volga Bulghāria emerged as a fully independent Islamic state.⁵¹ Eventually this became the act of international recognition of the Volga-Bulghāria as an independent state and resulted into the emergence of the Bulghārs as a first Muslim society of Northern Eurasia. The commercial dominance on the Volga River now became a well-deserved legacy of the Volga Bulghārs who, with their continuous import-export operations notwithstanding, were at that time already actively producing goods and even minting silver coins of their own.⁵²

One of the true measures of the emancipation of the Bulghār state was the ability of its rulers to establish diplomatic ties and conclude treaties with the neighbors, as well as with the rulers of more distant lands. In 984CE, for instance, the Bulghārs signed their first treaty with Kiev and when that treaty was renewed in 1006, it included trade privileges for the Bulghār and Russian merchants.⁵³ Volga Bulghāria had its good share of the treaties of 985 and 1006 because the Muslims of the region were able to further develop their trades and handicrafts; widen their numerous cities and towns; construct houses, schools, palaces, civic buildings and their agriculture prospered.⁵⁴ The Bulghār state was equally enthusiastic in its contact with Muslim countries. *Tarih-i Beihak* records that the ruler of the Bulghārs, Emir Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Muhhamad ibn Yaltawar, sent an embassy with the money to Beihak, the area of Nishapur, in 415 AH (1024/1025AD) in order to build two mosques in Sabzevar and Khosrowdzher.⁵⁵ It indicates regular religious political and cultural connections between the state of the Bulghārs and the state of the Samanids. Commercial liaisons with the Muslim world also burgeoned along the caravan routes and the Volga River; at the same time, more and more people from the area went to perform Hajj and returned to their homeland with the knowledge of the outer world.⁵⁶

By the end of 10th century CE, Volga Bulghāria and its capital *Bilyār*, in particular, had become one of the renowned centers of Islamic learning and scholarship.⁵⁷ The Arabic script that accompanied the adoption of Islam became not only the vehicle for disseminating a new religion but also the key to learning and opening the door to the cultural heritage of the Muslim East.⁵⁸ It must be noted, however, that the Bulghār lands were hardly a cultural wasteland at the time of their adoption of Islam. On the contrary, they had a rich written culture based on the Turkic runes of the Orkhon type.⁵⁹ Writing had developed and spread largely as a means of coping efficiently with economic (taxes, trade), legal, and political matters and the records were kept on wood and salt plaques until the 10th century, when paper was introduced from Khwarizm in Central Asia.⁶⁰ With the adoption of Islam, Arabic script replaced the Bulghār runes, and two styles of calligraphy: *Qufi* and *Thuluth* became particularly popular.⁶¹ The literary Bulghār language that emerged during this period became the vehicle of communication for the new written culture. The ethnic and cultural kinship enjoyed by the Turkic tribes living on the territory of the Bulghār state, along with the increasing centralization, made possible the emergence of such a language, which rendered the existing dialectal differences less significant even if it could not erase them entirely. The existence of a literary language had a profound effect on education and in

turn, that language was enriched by the fruits of education. Volga Bulghāria had a wide Islamic educational network represented by *maktabas* and *madrasas*. Its *Ulama* were in vanguard of Islamic creative thinking, promoting *tajdid* and *ijtihad*.⁶² The region also had schools where secular subjects received as much attention as teaching of the religious dogma. In addition to training future *ulama* and government bureaucrats, these schools provided at least basic literacy for the majority of the population.⁶³

The Muslims of Volga Bulghāria subsequently remained in closer relation to the Central Asian Emirates than to the seat of the Caliphate.⁶⁴ However, there are many instances recorded in the sources where the Bulghārs paid stately visits to the Baghdad court. One such instance is when Ahmad, Almush's son, who during his pilgrimage to *Makkah*, went to Baghdad, visited Caliph *Al-Muqtadir*, presenting him with a banner, *sawād* and money and Caliph *Al-Muqtadir* in return sent great standards and presents of money to the *Emir* of Bulghārs and Ahmad was also awarded many goods, animals, clothes, banners and musical instruments by the Caliph.⁶⁵ Islam became the nucleus around which the spiritual life of the *Bulghār* state developed. As for the expansion of Islamic practices, archeological explorations show that from the second half of the 10th century the pagan burial grounds begin to be replaced by Muslim graveyards.⁶⁶ In those days the burial rite was performed in strict accordance with the Hanafi law which does not approve of placing particular grave-stones upon the graves.⁶⁷ In later centuries, the *Bulghār* graves of the wealthier people were marked by carved stones with Arabic inscriptions.⁶⁸ At the beginning of the 13th century, the *Bulghār* grave-stones were already decorated with certain recurring motifs and calligraphic inscriptions, which can be found in Tatar cemeteries even today.⁶⁹ In any case, in the 10th century all Muslim graves were uniformly unmarked and distinguished by only a small elevation of the ground as famous historian D. Mukhametshin in this connection has noted:

In the *Bulghār* graveyards of the 10th-12th centuries, a typical 'orthodox' Islamic burial rite is observed. Here, a considerable unification of all details is noted: the strict observance of *Qiblah*, the body is typically placed with a slight turning to the right; the right arm is stretched along the body, the left arm bended under the pelvis. There is no any relic items whatsoever, and, on the graves, there is still no trace of the grave-stones.

From this one can easily judge that all over the area of the Bulghār kingdom a single *madhab* (*Hanafi* in its base) dominated, with a single alim based on secular authority, treating particular matters of law and ritual practice in accordance with tried and true traditions. Consequently, it was the tradition that was taught and reproduced in the madaris that ensured the succession and stability of the Muslim law code for more than two centuries, as testified by the *Bulghār* burial monuments in the 10th and first third of the 13th centuries. The spread of Islam and the formation of a new ethno-political consciousness led to the extrusion of all the previous forms of identity and an affirmation of the new one. The affirmation and spread of Islam was passing simultaneously among the towns; their divisions were the major knots of social, ethno-political and religious activity, places where new public relations and new ethos were modeled. All members of other tribes, entire groups, adopted Islam by entering the Bulghār community.

Such a conclusion draws one's attention to the state working as an integrating factor, with its institutions and religious system, the creation of alliances among new people, and social, political, religious and family categories being transformed by the public consciousness into historical and actual ethno-political stereotypes instead of ethno-linguistic or economic factors of unification. To put it in other words, it was the incorporation of the state of Bulghārs into Islamic civilization that molded the new ethno-political and ethno-confessional community.

Trade constituted a most important branch of the Bulghār economy. Bulghār merchants were engaged in both domestic and foreign trade, they monopolized the transit trade, utilizing the advantages of their land, which was richly endowed with a network of navigable rivers and was located at a crossroads between Northern Europe and Asia.⁷⁰ From the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Iran came spices, precious stones, rugs, gold, silver, and other luxury items; the Russian principalities sent furs, weapons, and glass ornaments; European merchants brought cloth, Frankish sabers, and amber; and the Bulghārs sold grains, honey, beeswax, felt, leather goods, and furs.⁷¹ Slaves were also an important Bulghār trade commodity; as such, they were subject to the tax levied on all traded goods, thus supplying additional revenue for the treasury of the Bulghār ruler.⁷²

It was this intense trade activity that was responsible for the emergence of fairs and marketplaces throughout the territory of the Bulghār state. The economic function of the cities, their emergence as trade centers, had a tangible impact on their physical development: *caravanserais*, which catered to the needs of the eastern merchants, became fixtures in Bulghār towns and

their main function was that of an inn, but most often it doubled as a combination inn, warehouse, and cultural center that provided merchants with food and shelter, storage facilities for their goods, and mosques where Muslims could perform their prayers.⁷³ Christian merchants lived on the outskirts of towns in segregated colonies probably not too different from the foreigners' quarters of medieval Moscow.⁷⁴ The most important role in the process of establishing economic dominance of Bulghārs belonged to the ancient trade centre long situated in the intersection of the Volga and Kama, which was called Aga-Bazaar.⁷⁵ Later, on the lower reaches of the Volga, another big trade centre, Saksin, took root and prospered on the commercial and pilgrimage routes to the Muslim south.⁷⁶ The former Khazar capital city of Itil in the mouth of the Volga in the course of the centuries developed into another important stopping point for merchants and pilgrims alike.⁷⁷ Because of its importance as a staging post for the Muslim pilgrims of the North, it assumed the name of *Hajitarkhan*: the present day Astrakhan.⁷⁸

Crafts were highly developed in Bulghār state, where skilled potters, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, carpenters, stonemasons, jewelers, and tanners were found not only in the towns but also in villages, where they fashioned goods of outstanding quality indistinguishable from similar items produced in urban centers.⁷⁹ Bulghār craftsmen were experts in processing the hides and the pelts. In fact, they became such experts in processing leather and fashioning leather goods such as boots, coats, belts, and trunks that their fame extended beyond the Urals and a certain type of leather came to be known as Bulghāri.⁸⁰ Indeed, in Central Asia and Iran the best leather and leather footwear is called Bulghār since these times.⁸¹ Bulghār stonemasons and carpenters acquired recognition at home, as well as in such faraway places as Central Asia and Vladimir-Suzdal, where they were invited to erect palaces, mosques and public edifices.⁸² During 1024 and 1025, when the Bulghār *Emir Ibrahim* sent an embassy to Khurasan; its main purpose was to provide for the cities of Sebzevar and Khosrowdzher, assistance in building mosques and other edifices.⁸³

Bulghār potters developed a technology and style of their own, which has made it possible to identify easily the yellowish-reddish earthenware found at various archaeological sites.⁸⁴ Most of the bowls, pitchers, pots, cauldrons, cups, and saucers these potters fashioned featured a glazed strip and were often decorated with original motifs.⁸⁵ As to the development of metallurgy and the level of artistic expertise, it will suffice to say that the Volga Bulghārs were the first in Europe to begin to smelt high-quality cast iron; the Bulghār towns and cities, except for the construction of

the mosques, schools, palaces, *caravanserai* and civic buildings with central heating and plumbing systems, were noted for ferrous metallurgy, gold and silver working, and the production of metal goods.⁸⁶ The gold and silver jewelry produced by Bulghār craftsmen is particularly interesting: gold ornaments often feature a waterfowl motif, as do the silver and copper twisted bracelets, pendants, and bronze mirrors.⁸⁷ The *Bulghār* professionals were so proud of their work that they often left their own trademarks on the manufactured items. One of the iron locks found in the archeological diggings, for instance, bears such an inscription:

This is an accomplishment of Abu Bekr son of Ahmad. Continuous glory and peaceful success, and all-embracing happiness, and grandeur, and prosperity be with the owner! In the summer of 541 [1146-1147].⁸⁸

Volga Bulghāria also produced a galaxy of towering personalities of versatile scholarship and learning, who gained fame and recognition beyond the shores of the Volga and Kama. Prominent among them was the 11th century theologian, Yakub ibn N‘uman (1022-1086 AD) who was also the *Qazi* of the capital city and a prolific historian.⁸⁹ The famous Andalusian traveler Abu Hamid al-Garnati, (1080-1169 AD) — the author of *Tuhfat al-Albab* (who visited the city of Bulghār several times between 1135 and 1151 AD, and made extensive use of use of local historical sources),— has frequently benefited from the scholarship of Ibn N‘uman. Another prominent scholar was (*Hoja*) Khwaja Ahmad al-Bulghāri who, according to some sources was also engaged as tutor by Mahmud Ghaznavi (907-1030 AD).⁹⁰ Other names include Abul ‘Ala Hamid bin Idris al-Bulghāri who flourished at the beginning of 12th century, the scholars and poets Sulaiman bin Da‘ud, Burhan al-din Ibrahim ibn Yusuf al-Bulghāri (d.1204 AD) and Tajuddin bin Yunus al-Bulghāri had become famous for their books on rhetoric, medicine, and religious commentaries.⁹¹ All these scholars lived and worked in the cities of Volga Bulghāria such as Bulghār the Great, *Suwar*, *Saksin* and *juketau*.⁹² One of the first classical Bulghār poets whose influence has persisted over the centuries was the Sufi Hoja (*Khwaja*) Ahmad Yasavi (d.1166 A.D), the founder of his own Sufi order, Yasaviya.⁹³ His verse played an important role in spreading not only his own brand of mysticism but Islamic ideology in general to all corners of the region. The literary figures and poets of undeniable worth and stature emerged in this region as great patriots of *Bulghār* culture and Islamic Civilization.

In any literature one looks for the appearance of a figure whose work constitutes the true beginning of the classical age; a poet or writer one can honor as being the founder of a solid tradition of national literature. Such a figure is Kol Gali/Qul Ali (1183-1236 CE), the national poet of Tatars whose long poem *Kitab-i-yusuf/Qissa-i-yusuf*, probably completed in 1233 CE/630 AH, is considered the first great master piece of Tatar literature.⁹⁴ This poem has been of interest to literary historians and linguists alike as an outstanding example of the spiritual legacy of thirteenth-century Bulghār society. The oldest existing manuscript of the poem is now in the Dresden Library.⁹⁵

All these sources indicate that by the end of the 10th century the Bulghār state was acting as a Muslim country at the international arena, with multiple trading, cultural and political relations with countries in Central and Far East Asia and the Middle East. Since the end of the 10th century the Bulghār state had become a country through which "classical Islam" had spread with many famous scholars and theologians who lived and worked within its area. All the large communities inside the country had Islamic justice systems and their own schools and madaris; the system of eastern spiritual education was developing in the major towns.⁹⁶ The encyclopedic scholar al-Biruni mentioned in his work that although the Bulghārs were detached from the "root countries of Islam", nevertheless they "are not deprived of news of the Caliphate or Caliphs; on the contrary, they read Khutbahs in their names".⁹⁷ By the end of 12th century, the Bulghār state had augmented its territory: in the east, its borders reached the river Zai, and in the south, they extended to the Samara.⁹⁸

Mongol Onslaught and the End of Volga Bulghāria

At this time in the Far East, the nomads of Mongolia united under the leadership of Temuchin, who took as his title Genghis Khan (1162-1227 AD).⁹⁹ Having subdued the rebellious tribes, whose name is recorded in Chinese sources as Ta-Ta, the victorious ruler turned his eye to China and the Muslim civilizations of the west.¹⁰⁰ Of the latter, Khwarizm became the first victim of Genghis's desire for world domination and in 1219 AD, this infant empire fell in a matter of weeks.¹⁰¹ Having conquered the main cities of Central Asia such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Urgench and Merv, the Mongol armies launched an attack on the Kipchak Steppe where in 1223 AD; they defeated the combined armies of the local Turks and Russians.¹⁰² In the autumn of the same year the Mongol general, Subutai, attempted to take Volga Bulghāria but failed.¹⁰³

In 1228 CE Mongol Kurultai¹⁰⁴ decided to launch a campaign against the Volga Bulghārs.¹⁰⁵ A year later, Batu Khan¹⁰⁶ reached the shores of Ural,

where he was successful in defeating the Bulghār outpost detachments and despite this victory, he choose to interrupt the campaign, only to renew it in 1232 CE, but at this time he failed to bring the Bulghār lands under Mongol control because the Mongols were repelled by the combined resistance of the Bulghārs and Russians.¹⁰⁷ This was the last military success of Volga Bulghāria. The outcome of these military operations prompted the Kurultai of 1235 CE to decide on a general campaign aimed at conquering not merely the Bulghār territories but the entirety of Batu's Ulus.¹⁰⁸ In the spring of 1236 AD, after careful preparations, Batu's 150,000-man army set forth for the Eastern Europe campaign and his forces were joined by those of other Genghisids (some 45,000 men) whose participation in the campaign had been made mandatory by the Kurultai.¹⁰⁹

Earlier encounters with the Mongols had awakened the Bulghārs to the reality of the restless giant to the East. In response, they had improved the defense of their cities to the degree that Bulghār alone boasted a defense force of 50,000 men.¹¹⁰ The Bulghārs, however, were no match for Batu's formidable army. In the autumn of 1236 CE the Mongols captured the Great city of Bulghār and reduced most of the neighboring towns to ashes.¹¹¹ The last sovereign of independent Volga Bulghāria, Ilham Khan, who had successfully organized the resistance of 1223 CE and 1232AD, was killed in the final battle with his enemy.¹¹² The charred buildings and bones unearthed by archeologists in 1969 AD and 1970 AD on the territory of the former Bulghār state have provided time-capsule evidence of the magnitude of the destruction.¹¹³

In 1236 AD, Mongols conquered Volga Bulghāria, but it took them many years to subjugate the whole country. Although the Volga Bulghārs lost their independence, their possessions and their estates to the Mongol invaders, they did not lose their religious faith or their culture. Sources record that Kol Gali also fell victim to the siege of the city of Bulghār but, his work which had already achieved great popularity was preserved.¹¹⁴ Kol Gali died at the height of the Volga Bulghār civilization, but his work remained a lasting monument to the spirit of its survival.¹¹⁵ Only after the invasion, when the Bulghārs broke up into single emirates and the former united Ulama system disappeared, did the process of erosion and strict Bulghār orthodoxy graduation took place.¹¹⁶ Henceforth Volga Bulghāria became a part of the Ulus Jochi,¹¹⁷ later known as the Golden Horde.

Conclusion

The society of Volga Bulghāria after accepting Islam in 922 CE, developed together with the development of the state itself. As we have seen, the main ethnic components of the population of the region in 8-9th centuries were the Turkic and the Finno-Ugric tribes. Their pre-Islamic coexistence produced not only a very peculiar material culture, but also a specific system of beliefs, some of which survived well into the Islamic centuries. Thus, the prosperity of the state, the growth of towns, the creation of city coin, as well as the recognition of the uniformed spiritual and material Islamic culture throughout the country contributed to the creation of a united ethno-political alliance of the medieval Bulghārs; their ideological basis was the Islamic world outlook and an idea of the common past and their mission in the world of Islam. According to historical and archaeological data, from the late 10th century onwards the state of the Bulghārs had grown into a country of "classical Islam", both in state organization and the core of the cultural spirit; numerous scholars and theologians lived and worked there, and people were avidly following Islamic ceremonies. A unified recognition of a Muslim culture throughout the country contributed to the creation of major features of the Bulghār ethno-political alliance and the original Turko-Muslim culture.

During the 11th and 12th centuries, before the Mongol invasion, which began in earnest in 1236 CE, Volga Bulghāria appears to have been prosperous in both material and cultural terms. In his work *Islam in the Soviet Union*, Alexandre Bennigsen refers to the Bulghārs of the Volga as the possessors of an ancient and splendid civilization. The legacy of the Bulghārs endured and, in the nineteenth century, was so tangible that Russian historian S. M. Solov'ev reflected:

For a long time, Asia, Muslim Asia built here a home; a home not for nomadic hordes but for its civilization; for a long time, a commercial and industrious people, the Bulghārs had been established here. When the Bulghār was already listening to the Qur'an on the shores of the Volga and the Kama, the Russia: Slav had not yet started to build Christian churches on the Oka and had not yet conquered these places in the name of European civilization.

Volga Bulghāria could be only compared to Muslim Spain. Engaged in economic and intellectual pursuits far from the turmoil and ordeals of the day, Volga Bulghāria was quite satisfied with what she had, nor wishing for anything more in terms of enlarging its territory

at the expense of less civilized peoples to the East, neither apprehending the change in the Russian fortunes. The status quo she had achieved appeared to her to remain ever-lasting. The internal and external policy of the Bulghār kingdom was, on one hand, defined by the dominant position of the country on the Great Volga route and the northern branches of the Grand Silk route and, on the other hand, by an affiliation with the world of Islam. The Bulghārs were quite able not only to resist invasions by the Kipchaks and Russian princes, but for thirteen years they were able to confront the Tatar-Mongol hordes. For a long period, peace was maintained in the Volga region, with mutually beneficial trade, which opened the Russian market to eastern goods.

Since the time of Ibn Fadlan, no geographical work that has been written fails to mention the Volga Bulghārs. Their description became part of a tradition and information about them was rewritten, added to and changed, particularly after Bulghār state gained momentum and grew into a powerful medieval Islamic state. Its connections with Islamic countries were developed and strengthened. Caliph Al-Muqtadir heard about the Volga Bulghārs only once more before his tragic death in 932 AD, when the Volga Bulghār delegation returned him a stately visit on their way to pilgrimage. Al-Muqtadir's reign, marked by domestic turmoil and rebellions, remains in Islamic history as one of the most unsuccessful and one which laid the ground for the further disintegration of the Caliphate. Yet, in the Volga region, he is always remembered with high degree of respect, for it was he who sent his delegation to Volga Bulghārs with the royal message of Islam. As for Ibn Fadlan, it is to him we owe the precious information about the very first people who readily and voluntarily accepted Islam in this part of the world.

Notes and References

- ¹ Bukharaev Ravil, *Islam in Russia: The Four Seasons*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2000, p.63.
- ² Sinor Denis, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, Cambridge, 1990, pp.235-236.
- ³ Martin Janet, *Treasures of The Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and its Significance for Medieval Russia*, Cambridge, 1986, p.7.
- ⁴The *Kipchaks* (known in Russian and Ukrainian as *Polovtsy*) were a Turkic tribal confederation which originally settled at the River Irtysh. Originating in the *Kimek Khanate*, they conquered large parts of the Eurasian steppe during the Turkic expansion of the 11th to 12th centuries together with the Cumans, and were in turn conquered by the Mongol invasions of the early 13th century.
- ⁵ The *Ghuzz* or Turkmen also known as *Oguz* were a historical Turkic tribal confederation conventionally named Oghuz Yabgu State in Central Asia during the early medieval period. The name Oguz is a Common Turkic word for "tribe". The founders of the Ottoman Empire were descendants of the *Oguz Yabgu* State.
- ⁶ Galina M. Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p.4.
- ⁷ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.33.
- ⁸ Ibn Fadlan, *Safar Nama*, tr. Syed Abul Fadl Tabai, Iran, 2535 Yurmah, p.97.
- ⁹ *Id.* at p.98.
- ¹⁰Izmailov Iskander, *Penetration of Islam and Formation of the First Muslim State in Northern Eurasia (10th to 13th centuries)*, In *Tatar History and Civilisation*, Istanbul, 2010, p.52.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Mathews J. David and Bukharaev Ravil, ed., *Historical Anthrology of Kazan Tatar Verse*, Surrey, 2000. p.3.
- ¹⁴ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience*, Stanford, 1986, p.11.
- ¹⁵ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.53.
- ¹⁶ *Id.* at p.56.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *loc.cit.*
- ¹⁹ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.53.
- ²⁰ *Id.* at p.52.
- ²¹ Abdullah ibn Bashtu was a *Khazarian* Muslim and a political refugee at *Almush's* court. Islam gained popularity among many sections of the Khazar population after one of the *Khazar Khāqāns*, defeated by the Arabs in 737 ADCE, embraced Islam and strengthened trade relations between Khazaria and Khwarizm. Soon after this, towards the end of 8th century *Khazar* upper class embraced Judaism as the state religion and this gave rise to antagonism on the basis of religion between the *Khazar* elite and Muslim *Khazarians*. Such continuing tension between the dominant Judaic and subdued Muslim fractions of Khazar society was a natural reason for the emergence, in the course of time, of pro-Caliphate parties who were interested in encouraging the spread of Islam not only within the Khazarian domain, but also beyond its frontiers to the east and north. Abdullah ibn Bashtu was a member of the Muslim party within the *Khazar* Empire which was dreaming of turning this empire into an Islamic one. There were established channels by which the Muslims of Khazaria could communicate with the Volga

Bulghārs and their ruler. In Volga Bulghāria, even before the arrival of the official Baghdadi delegation, there were Muslim settlements with their own mosques. These were founded by the Central Asian merchants who used Volga Bulghāria as an important trade centre in their dealings with the peoples living further north. For them, it was also important to expand Islam in Volga Bulghāria, thus establishing firmer commercial and political connections with the Caliphate in Baghdad at the expense of the Khazar economy which flourished in the mouth of the Volga on the Caspian Sea and the mouth of the Don on the Azov Sea leading to the Black Sea and, from there, to the Mediterranean and to Africa and Spain. The prospect of a thriving commerce free from the political and economic dictate of the *Khazars* induced the Muslim groups within the Volga Bulghāria to seek opportunities to weaken the *Khazar* Empire, and so the Muslim political exiles from the *Khazar* Empire were by all means welcomed and helped. It looks credible that exactly these Muslim groups were most instrumental in persuading the ruler of the Volga Bulghārs to send the letter to the Caliph and to introduce to the latter the Khazarian exile Abdallah. Iskander, *The Pre-Islamic Period (up to the 10th century)*, In *Tatar History and Civilisation*, Istanbul, 2010, pp.46-47; Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.35.

²² Azade Ayse Rorlich, *loc.cit.*

²³ Ibn Fadlan, *op.cit.* pp. 20, 57, 98.

²⁴ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Id.* at pp.55-56.

²⁷ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.36.

²⁸ Cahen Claude, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey: A General Survey of the Material and Spiritual Culture and History c. 1071-1330*, Newyork, 1968, pp.5-6.

²⁹ Ibn Fadlan, *op.cit.* p.57.

³⁰ *Id.* at p.81.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.55.

³⁶ *Id.* at p.56.

³⁷ Nabiev R.A., *Islam in Tatarstan: Experience of Tolerance and Culture of Co-existence*, Kazan, 2002, p.58.

³⁸ Mathews J.David and Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.3.

³⁹ Nabiev R.A., *loc.cit.*

⁴⁰ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.65.

⁴¹ Mathews J.David and Bukharaev Ravil, *loc.cit.*

⁴² Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.83.

⁴³ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *loc.cit.*

⁴⁴ Bukharaev Ravil, *loc.cit.*

⁴⁵ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.57.

⁴⁶ Garnati Abu Hamid, *Tuhfat al-Albab fi Nukhbat al-Ajaib*, Moscow, 1971, pp.31-33.

⁴⁷ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.62.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at p.63.

⁴⁹ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.72.

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- ⁵⁰ Id. at p.46.
⁵¹ Ibid.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵³ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.12.
⁵⁴ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.94.
⁵⁵ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.60.
⁵⁶ Bukharaev Ravil, *loc.cit.*
⁵⁷ Galina M. Yemelianova, *op.cit.* p.8.
⁵⁸ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.15.
⁵⁹ Ibid.
⁶⁰ Ibid.
⁶¹ Id. at p.16.
⁶² Galina M. Yemelianova, *loc.cit.*
⁶³ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.16.
⁶⁴ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.56.
⁶⁵ Al-Masudi, *Muruj adh-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawhar*, tr. Aloys Sprenger, Vol. 1, London, 1841, pp.413-114.
⁶⁶ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.87.
⁶⁷ Ibid.
⁶⁸ Ibid.
⁶⁹ Ibid.
⁷⁰ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.15.
⁷¹ Ibid.
⁷² Ibid.
⁷³ Ibid.
⁷⁴ Ibid.
⁷⁵ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.85.
⁷⁶ Id. at p.86.
⁷⁷ Ibid.
⁷⁸ Ibid.
⁷⁹ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.13.
⁸⁰ Ibid.
⁸¹ Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.86.
⁸² Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.14.
⁸³ Id. at p.12.
⁸⁴ Id. at p.13.
⁸⁵ Id. at pp.13-14.
⁸⁶ Bukharaev Ravil, *loc.cit.*
⁸⁷ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *loc.cit.*
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⁸⁹ Mathews J.David and Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* Pp.3-4.
⁹⁰ Marjani Shihabuddin, *Mustafadel Akhbar fi Ahwali Kazan wa Bulghar*, Vol. 1, Kazan, 1897, pp.80-81.
⁹¹ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.16.
⁹² Mathews J.David and Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.4.
⁹³ Id. at p.5.
⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Id. at pp.5-6.

⁹⁶ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.62.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.11.

⁹⁹ Mathews J.David and Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.10.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ *Kurultai* is a political and military council of ancient Mongol and Turkic chiefs and *khans*. The root of the word is "*Khur*" (assemble/discuss) and that helps form "*Khural*" meaning political "meeting" or "assembly" in Turkic and Mongolian languages. Generally, a *Kurultai* would meet for the purpose of making a major political or military decision, such as the selection of a new *khan* or the launching of a war. Ordinarily, the nomadic Mongols and Turkic peoples lived scattered across the steppe-lands, so it was a momentous occasion when a chief called for a *Kurultai*. Famous examples of *Kurultai* include the 1206 AD assembly that named *Temuchin* as "*Genghis Khan*" meaning the "Oceanic Ruler" of all the Mongols. In modern usage, some Central Asian nations use the word *Kurultai* or variants to describe their parliaments or for conferences. For example, Kyrgyzstan boasts a National *Kurultai* of Kyrgyz Peoples, which deals with inter-ethnic strife, while Mongolia's national congress is called the Great State *Khural*.

¹⁰⁵ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* p.17.

¹⁰⁶ *Batu Khan* was the grandson of *Genghis Khan*.

¹⁰⁷ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *loc.cit.*

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Spuler B., ed., *The Muslim world: The Mongol Period*, Vol. 3, Leiden, 1960, p.7.

¹¹⁰ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *loc.cit.*

¹¹¹ Mathews J. David and Bukharaev Ravil, *loc.cit.*

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Azade Ayse Rorlich, *op.cit.* Pp.17-18.

¹¹⁴ Mathews J. David and Bukharaev Ravil, *loc.cit.*

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Izmailov Iskander, *op.cit.* p.63.

¹¹⁷ *Genghis Khan* died in 1227 AD having earlier bequeathed to his son *Jochi* the vast area of his empire henceforth called the *Ulus Jochi* which encompassed not only the territories of Central Asia and Siberia but also the lands of *Kipchaks*, *Volga Bulghārs*, *Rus* and those of the west which were still to be conquered. But *Jochi* was murdered six months before his father and the empire fell into the hands of his son *Batu*, who was to head the *Ulus Jochi*, later known as Golden Horde. Mathews J. David and Bukharaev Ravil, *op.cit.* p.11.