

# THE VOLGA BULGARS – Trade

## OVERVIEW

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Volga Bulgaria was a principle transit point for the Muslim merchants from Central Asia and Persia to transport commodities such as furs and forest products through Kharezm and the Khazar-controlled Volga Caspian route to Eastern Europe. As a result, the Volga Bulgars were able to extend their commercial contacts across a vast area that extended from China, Central Asia, Khazaria, Rus', Transcaucasia, Byzantium, and the Islamic world.

The Volga Bulgars established their control of the northern trade route to Beloozero and established strong links with the Baltic trade that passed along the Volga river. The Kievan Rus' allowed the Volga Bulgarians to trade not only in Suzdal, but also in cities along the Volga and Oka Rivers.

Both the states around the Mediterranean as well as the Central Asian peoples also bartered their commodities to the Finno-Ugrians through Volga Bulgaria in exchange for furs.

## TRADE



The Volga Bulgarians' economy was based on agriculture, pastoralism and commerce. By being a transit point, Volga Bulgaria controlled much of the trade between Northern Europe, the Muslim world (the Samanids, Ghaznavids and Karakhanids), Central Asia and the Kievan Rus' through the Volga river. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the capital of Volga Bulgaria, Bolgar, became a prosperous city comparable in size and importance to the cities of the medieval Islamic world.

*The Volga trade route is shown in red.*

Bilär was a main trade center in the Middle Volga, and, in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries alternated with the cities of Bolgar and Nur-Suvar as the capital of Volga Bulgaria.

Trade formed the most important part of the Volga Bulgar economy. At the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Volga Bulgaria was the leading fur-trading center of Eastern Europe after the Rus' city of Novgorod. They also traded grains, wax, honey, felt, leather, timber and amber to many countries in Europe and Asia. The other major source of revenue was a tax levied on all traded goods. Thus, the foreign merchants who passed through Volga Bulgaria had to pay an enormous quantity of dirhams (Muslim silver coins) in tax. Slaves were also an important item of trade and provided considerable amount of additional revenue for the treasury.

The Volga Bulgars profited from the commercial relations established with the Rus'. The relations between the Volga Bulgars and the Rus' improved when the Rus' and Volga Bulgars signed a trade agreement that allowed Rus' merchants to trade freely in the Volga Bulgar cities along the Volga and Oka Rivers.

From the Russian principalities came furs, weapons, and glass ornaments; while European merchants brought textiles, amber and Frankish swords. The Caucasus, Central Asia, and Persia transported to Volga Bulgaria gold, silver, rugs, precious stones, and spices as well as other luxury items.

With the development of the Rostov-Suzdal principality in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the upper Volga fell under the control of the Rus' and the Volga Bulgar merchants were cut off from the northern trade. This led to bloody fighting, which resulted in the Volga Bulgarians finding a new route to the north along the Unzha river. Later, the Rus' gained control over this important strategic site and, to prevent the Volga Bulgars' from transporting their goods, between the mouths of the Unzha and Oka rivers they built a fortress called Gorodets. However, in 1219, Volga Bulgaria regained control over this territory.

The Volga Bulgar traded their luxury furs through the Volga river only as far south as Saray. However, during the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Moscow established its hegemony over the Perm of the Vychehda-Vym region and Volga Bulgar's fur trading route became unusable. When the Golden Horde fell into political turmoil, this unstable political atmosphere affected both Volga Bulgaria and the trade along the Volga route.

In 1236 Mongol armies attacked and severely damaged the city of Bolgar. Despite of this, the city recovered and continued to flourish into the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and drew traders from the Muslim East as well as from Russia.

In 1361, Volga Bulgaria and the lower Volga region fell under the control of one of the khans of the Horde, and it began to disintegrate politically and, as a result, the fur trade radically declined.

### **Discussion/Questions**

1. Why did the Volga Bulgars become such an important part of the Eurasian trade network, and how did they maintain their dominant position?

### **Readings**

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