

THE VOLGA BULGARS – Social Structure

OVERVIEW

The realm of the khagan of the Volga Bulgar Khanate was at the confluence of the upper Volga and Kama Rivers. The Khanate was a union of tribes with different languages, different social structures and cultures. The Volga Bulgars were composed of five tribes: the Bulgars proper, the Suvars, the Esegel, the Bersula, and the Barandzhar. Despite the tribal diversity, they were united in the 10th century. However, tribal and ethnic diversity later caused a struggle for supremacy that was fueled by tribal rivalries during the period of consolidation and centralization. The Bulgars and the Suvars struggle for supremacy led to the emergence of two political centers: Biliar-Bulgar and Suvar. Eventually, the sovereignty of Suvar was eliminated, and the Bulgar lands united around Bilär – Bulgar. This struggle ended towards the end of the 10th century and all tribal leaders and lesser officials became subordinate to the supreme Emir.

Below the Emir, the nobility, military, merchants and artisans constituted the rest of the social structure of the Khanate. According to Ibn Fadlān, there were many merchants living in Volga Bulgaria and “they traveled to the territory of the Turks and bring back sheep and travel to another land, called Wīṣū, and bring back sable and black fox”.

CLASSES

In the 10th century, the Volga Bulgar were a multiethnic state. The tribal and multiethnic structure of the state made consolidation and centralization difficult. The largest ethnic group was Volga Bulgars, but there were also Finnic, Ugric, Bashkirs, Eastern Slavic peoples and other tribes.

At the top of the political structure was the *Emir*. The Volga Bulgar state had an *Emir* with his own retinue and court, and all other tribal leaders and lesser officials was subject to the authority of the *Emir*.

Below the Emir was a ruling class that included a military nobility that was made up of a number of families. Governors called *Tudun* were responsible for border fortresses. There were also noble elites who served in the military and the administrative institutions.

Trade was the most important source of revenue in the Volga Bulgar economy. The Volga Bulgar merchants engaged in both domestic and foreign trade. Volga Bulgaria became a transit center allowing Muslim merchants to travel from Central Asia and Persia through Khwarazm to Eastern Europe, and the Volga Bulgar emir took a levy from the transient merchants who were not only Muslim, but also included Jews, Christians, and pagans from Central Asia, Persia, Byzantium, Kievan Rus', the Caucasus, and Bolgar.

The Volga Bulgar townspeople, merchants and artisans made up the majority of the free urban population. These people paid a house tax to the state treasury.

The merchants were involved in both domestic and foreign trade. The lowest level in Volga Bulgar society consisted of slaves who played an important role in the state's commercial life. Like free merchants, the slaves involved in commerce were subject to the trade tax.

Some Volga Bulgar master merchants and artisans were forcibly moved to the capital of the Golden Horde, Saray, during the Mongol invasion.

Discussion/Questions

1. What factors made the Volga Bulgar state such an important center for both local and long-distance trade?

Readings

- 1- Zimonyi, I., "The Volga Bulgars between Wind and Water (1220—1236)", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* , 1992/93, Vol. 46, No. 2/3 (1992/93), pp. 347-355.
- 2- Shpakovsky, V. & Nicolle, D., *Armies of the Volga Bulgars & Khanate of Kazan 9th–16th Centuries*, Osprey Publishing, 2013.
- 3- Golden, P. B., *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, Ethnogenesis and State Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East, Wiesbaden, 1992.
- 4- Hartley, J.M., *The Volga, A History*, Yale University Press, 2021.
- 5- Смирнов, А.П., *Волжские Булгары*, Издание государственного исторического музея, 1951.
- 6- Rorlich, A.A., *The Volga Tatars, A Profile in National Resilience*, Hoover Institution Press, 1986.
- 7- Zimonyi, I., "The Volga Bulgars between Wind and Water (1220—1236)", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* , 1992/93, Vol. 46, No. 2/3 (1992/93), pp. 347-355.
- 8- Ibn Faḍlān, A., *Mission to the Volga*, Translated by James E. Montgomery, New York University Press, 2017.