

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# THE VOLGA BULGARS – Gender

## OVERVIEW

In pagan Volga Bulgar society, both within the aristocracy and among the common people, the status of women was very high. They had the same rights as men since their social status was determined by historical circumstances inherited from ancient Turkic traditions. In addition to their status as a wife and mother, they played a very active role in their tribe, clan or family. They also rode horses on par with men, carried weapons and, sometimes, they even participated in battles.

With the adoption of Islam, the legal status of Volga Bulgar women changed, and they had to follow Sharia norms of behavior within their community and family.

## GENDER

The status of women in the society of Volga Bulgarians during the pagan period shows parallels with the social status of women of ancient Turkic society. Women, like men, were considered full members of their society.

Ibn Fadlan in his travel account stated that polygamy was a common practice in Volga Bulgaria. He also talked about what happened when a man died and left a wife and sons behind. He stated that the eldest son married his dead father's wife, provided she was not his birth mother.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Volga Bulgarian women played a leading role in their household. Ibn Fadlan, who travelled in Volga Bulgaria, was surprised by the treatment of women in their society when he saw that the wives of the Volga Bulgarian rulers were present at the reception of guests and during discussions of affairs of state. Volga Bulgarian women would also defend their tribe against enemies when the men were gone. Moreover, there were also women rulers and military leaders.

In the international arena, Volga Bulgarian noblewomen also participated in their husbands' visit to Constantinople in 619 led by the khan Kurt (Kubrat) and accompanied by his archonts (boyars).

The major change in Volga Bulgar women's status came with conversion of the Volga Bulgarians to Islam in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. The relative freedom and social equality that women had enjoyed was gradually replaced by more restrictive Sharia practices. Women could no longer freely interact with men, or even sit at the same table with them. Although men were enjoined to love their wives, treat them with kindness and provide for them, women were now expected to remain in the home and isolated from men who were not their husbands or close relatives.

## Discussion/Questions

1. Why did the conversion to Islam by the Volga Bulgars have such a dramatic effect on the status and role of women?

## Readings

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