

THE VOLGA BULGARS – Language

OVERVIEW

The original language of the Bulgars was a Turkic language, although there are some who have argued that the Bulgar language was related to Turkic, but a distinct branch of the Altaic languages. The Bulgars were one of the many tribes or clans that had mingled with the Huns; some were Oghurs speaking a dialect of the northwestern Kipchak languages, while others were labelled Oghur Turks, Onoghurs, Uitgurs and Kutrigurs.

Some scholars have posited that the Volga Bulgar language, like the Khazar language, was an ancestor of the Chuvash language, thus linking the two peoples historically and linguistically.

Most of our knowledge of the Volga Bulgar language is derived from inscriptions on tombstones from the 13th-14th centuries written in the Arabic script. These contain words from the Chuvash Turkic language as well as a limited number of sentences.

LANGUAGE

The written sources about the Volga Bulgars belong to the 10th century and they were written mostly by Muslim authors. The Persian traveler Al-Istakhri in his *Kitab Masalik al-Mamalik* stated that the Khazars were ethnically close to the Volga Bulgars, and that the language of Volga Bulgars was like the language of Khazars.

It has been claimed that the Khazar language can be considered a Chuvash dialect of Turkish that belongs to the Oghuric linguistic group, and that the Volga Bulgars' language was similar to the language of the Khazars. Since Chuvash is the only extant representative of this linguistic group, the Volga Bulgars' language should be regarded as an ancestor of Chuvash.



Volga Bulgar inscriptions have been found mostly in the territory of Tatarstan and written in Arabic (with the adoption of Islam, the Arabic script replaced the Bulgar runes) from the 13-14th centuries which include some words, expressions and a few sentences of Chuvash Turkic. They date to the period after the fall of the Volga Bulgar Khanate in the era of the Golden Horde.

The Inscription of Volga Bulgaria, 1308.

In addition, Nikolai Ashmarin made a similar claim in his book *Bulgary i Chuvashi* (1902) that the Volga Bulgars' language was the ancestor of Chuvash. He based this claim on the previously mentioned Volga Bulgar inscriptions from the 13-14th centuries and the snippets of Volga Bulgarian found in Muslim and Russian sources. In short, he argued that as the only modern representative of the Oghur branch of the Turkic languages, the Chuvash language was the descendent of the Volga Bulgar dialect.

Western Old Turkic was a complex mix of the Oghur language varieties that had emerged in a large, mostly East European, linguistic area and was spoken in the Khazar empire and in the Danube Bulgar khaganate between the 7th and 9th centuries. The Volga Bulgars also used Western Old Turkic in the Volga region between the 9th and mid-13th centuries.

Discussion/Questions

1. What evidence supports the claim that the Volga Bulgar language is the ancestor of Chuvash?

Reading

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4- Ковалевский, А.П., *Чувашы и болгары по данным Ахмеда ибн-Фадлана*, Чувашгосиздат, 1954.

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