

# THE VOLGA BULGARS – RELIGION

## OVERVIEW

The early Volga Bulgars were pagans and their beliefs were based on Turkic Tengrism. They worshipped natural phenomena – the sun, moon, thunder, water, trees etc. They also worshipped a female deity, Turkic goddess Umay.

The Volga Bulgars adopted Islam in 922. They embraced Islam in order to lessen their political dependence on the Khazars and to speed up the process of consolidation and centralization of the Volga Bulgar lands..

## RELIGION

Archeological findings in the cemeteries at Tankeyevka and in the burial site of Bolshie Tarhany at Kubishev provided evidence that the early Volga Bulgars were pagans and their belief was based on Turkic Tengrism.

The majority of them converted to Islam in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The ruler of the Volga Bulgars, Elteber Almish, sought official recognition from the Abbasid Caliphate in exchange for converting Islam. He sent Abdallah ibn-Bashtu to present three letters conveying his desire to be instructed in the religion of Islam. The Caliph Ja'far al-Muktadir accepted his offer and sent Ibn-Fadlan's embassy to the land of the Bulgars. Almish converted to Islam in 921 and adopted the Muslim name of Ja'far Ibn 'Abdullah. Almish decision to adopt Islam was to speed up the process of the consolidation and centralization of his lands.

Ibn Fadlan who was sent to the land of the Volga Bulgars by the Abbasid Caliph al-Muktadir in 922–923, wrote his *Risāla* in which he talked about how the Volga Bulgars embraced Islam. His primary mission was to convert them to Islam, and to supervise the construction of their first mosque.



He recorded in his *Risāla* that “There was one household of five thousand individuals, men and women. They had all converted to Islam and are known as the Baranjār. They had built a mosque out of wood to pray in but did not know how to read the Qur’an” I taught one group how to conduct their prayers. A man named Saul converted to Islam under my supervision, and I gave him the name ‘Abdallāh, but he said, “I want you to give me your name—Muḥammad.” I did so. His wife, mother, and children also converted. They all took the name Muḥammad”.

*The arrival of the Caliph's embassy in Bolghar, by B.A. Gilvanov.*

Another visitor to the area at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century was the Arab geographer Abu-Ali Ibn-Rusta, who remarked that “most of them adhere to Islam; they have mosques and elementary schools in their villages.

The *Tārīkh-i-Bulghār* (the History of Bulgaria), written by Yakub İbn-i Numan soon after Almish's conversion, related that the conversion of the Volga Bulgars resulted after the treatment of the king and queen by a Muslim physician allowed them to overcome their non-Muslim enemies. The *Tārīkh-i-Bulghār* has not survived, but was summarized in the work of a traveler from Granada, Abu Hamid al-Garnatī in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

After 1100, some Volga Bulgars adopted Christianity. The evidence for this religious transition can be seen in the adoption of new types of military equipment, trappings for horses and changes in cavalry tactics – a reduction in Turkic mounted archery and a shift to Western style close combat with heavy cavalry.

### **Discussion/Questions**

1- What factors may have prompted some of the Volga Bulgars to convert to Christianity in the 12<sup>th</sup> century?

### **Readings:**

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3- Mako, G., “The Islamization of the Volga Bulgars: A Question Reconsidered”, *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, edited by Th. T. Allsen, P. B. Golden, R. K. Kovalev, and A. P. Martinez Vol. 18, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012, pp. 199–223.

4- \_\_\_\_\_, “The Conversion of the Volga Bulgars” *Aḥmad b. Faḍlān b. al-‘Abbās b. Rāshid b. Ḥammād (fl. tenth century)*, in *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age A Sourcebook*, Edited by Nimrod Hurvitz, Christianm C. Sahner, Uriel Simonsohn, and Luke Yarbrough, University of California Press, Ch. 24, 2020.

5- Waldman, C., and Mason, C., *Encyclopedia of European Peoples*, Facts On File Inc., 2006.

6- Хакимов Р.С., Усманов М.Г., *История татар с древнейших времен : в семи томах. Том 2. Волжская Булгария и Великая Степь*, РухИЛ, 2006.

7- Picture: The arrival of the Caliph’s embassy in Bolghar, by V.A. Gilvanov <https://rezansky.com/volga-bulgaria/>

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9- Rorlich, A.A., *The Volga Tatars, A Profile in National Resilience*, Hoover Institution Press, Ch. 2, The Bulgar State, 1986.

10- *Mission to the Volga by Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān*, translated by James E. Montgomery, New York University Press, 2017.

11- Zimonyi, I., *The Origins of Volga Bulgars*, Studia Uralo-Altaica, 1989.