

# THE VOLGA BULGARS – Military

## OVERVIEW

Volga Bulgaria was a loosely defined geographical region, ruled by a khan who was supported by an elite military force. Due to tensions, frequent clashes and uncertain relationships with the neighboring countries, the Volga Bulgarians regularly drilled their armies. Their intense trade activity was another reason to build a strong army in order to protect the transportation of goods.

In the 10th and 11th centuries the Volga Bulgars' military structure consisted of the khan's retinue that numbered only 500 fighting men. The size of the khan's retinue increased significantly in conjunction with the increase in population and frequent hostilities threatening the khan's authority.

## MILITARY

During the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Volga Bulgar military structure included a retinue in the service of a leading king or khan.

The Volga Bulgar military forces included the *hashum* (the ruler's guards), followed by a secondary force, the *hyane* (the ruler's youngest retinue). Real power was in the hands of the leaders of the *hashum* and the local nobility, and they were the ones founded the military system.



The *ushkuyniki* (professional fighters) who could fight with infantry and cavalry forces were well equipped and wore Western-style mail hauberks. The *yori* (military service class) also served in the Volga Bulgar military and constituted ten per cent of the male population. There were also vassal princes and chiefs, and detachments from conquered tribes such as the Mari, Mordvians and others.

From the 12th to the 13th centuries, the Volga Bulgar military organization included an Emir, beg, the beg's retinue, hashum (elite guards), Chirmesh (urban militia), mercenaries and detachment of allies.

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century a group known as the *ulans* constituted the highest class of the military establishment. The ulans appear to have been the commanders of cavalry units, but, in addition to their military role, they sometimes served in a diplomatic role. In exchange for these vital services, the ulans were granted land holdings. The Khan also had a personal guard, the *ichki*, who served in the fortress in the capital city of Kazan.

Since the Volga Bulgar cavalry confronted not only the heavily armored warriors of the Russian *druzhina*, but also the light cavalry of the steppe nomads, they usually carried light, curved sabers which allowed them to make more rapid fencing movements on horseback.

The Volga Bulgars also utilized weapons like spears, flails, axes for a light-armed rider, axes for foot-soldiers, swords (Carolingian type), lances, maces, daggers, sabers and longer-range weapons such as bows and crossbows that were made of laminated wood or bone.



Sword found in the territory of the Volga Bulgars, 10<sup>th</sup> century

Saber blades found with the territory of the Volga Bulgars were generally long and narrow, that smoothly tapered to a point. Their scabbards were wooden, covered in leather and finished with bronze mounts and decoration. Following the Mongol invasions the saber became an even more typical weapon of the cavalry of the Khanate of Kazan, remaining so until its final fall in the 16th century.

The spears used by the Volga Bulgars were javelins, known as *sulitisa*, and were used by both the infantry and the cavalry to fight against Mongol archers.

Numerous types of axes have been found, ranging from highly decorated battleaxes used by warriors to simpler working types that were probable in the hands of the peasant militias. The most distinctive ones featured a hammerhead or curved beak behind the axe blade.

### Discussion/Questions

1. What factors encouraged the Volga Bulgars to maintain a standing army?
2. Why did the Volga Bulgars use javelins rather than lances\*

### Readings

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