

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE VOLGA BULGARS – MYTHOLOGY

OVERVIEW

Archaeological findings from the pagan cemeteries and sites of the Volga Bulgars provide information about the early Bulgars' religious rites.

Pagan Volga Bulgars had a system of pantheism that consisted of a collection of gods. They believed in the spiritual power of elements and phenomena that exist in nature like the sun, moon, thunder, water, trees, fire etc.

MYTHOLOGY

Pagan beliefs survived in Volga Bulgaria even after the conversion to Islam especially outside the major cities. Pagan rituals were used during births, funerals, and harvest festivals. There were also special rituals conducted during the construction of a building.

Ḥusām ad-Dīn bin Sharaf al-Dīn al-Bulghāri, in his *Tawārīkh-I Bulgāriyya* reveals the information that the Bulgars of that time were fire-worshippers.

Ibn Fadlan, describing a funeral, reported that the Volga Bulgarians carried the dead body to the cemetery on a carriage and buried it in an underground chamber used for multiple burials.

The Volga Bulgarian women did not cry over the dead, only men cried loudly near the grave. They brought his weapons and laid them around his grave. Then his slaves whipped their bodies very strongly with a knotted cord. They do not stop crying for two years. When two years passed, the kinsmen and kinswomen of the deceased held a banquet to honour the end of mourning.

Archaeological excavations conducted at the burial sites proved that adoption of Islam did not completely wipe out their pagan beliefs and habits, on the contrary, they coexisted with the new religion. Although the number of the pagan cemeteries declined after the 10th century, pagan beliefs were so deeply embedded in Volga Bulgarian culture that even in the second half of the 11th century there were still pagan burial habits that were reflected in the burial sites.

Discussion/Questions

1- Why do pagan practices of the Volga Bulgars seem to have survived particularly in relation to funeral practices?

Readings

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