

## SOME NOTES ABOUT THE ISLAMIZATION OF THE VOLGA BULGHARS

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By the second decade of the X<sup>th</sup> century Almiş, ruler of the Volga Bulgars felt his realm strong enough, and estimated the Khazar Khaqanate's power duly weak to accomplish a political maneuver which greatly affected the history of the East-European steppe for the next centuries. This maneuver was the adoption of the Islam, pursuant to which, he sent a legation, lead by Abdallah ibn Bastu to caliph al-Muqtadir (908–932) to Baghdad in 920 to ask missionaries and experts for himself, and for his country<sup>1</sup>.

Almiş bulgar leader sent the legation to the caliph in an undoubtedly favorable geopolitical situation. One of the most important elements was that the Khazar Khaqanate's power, which was the dominant authority of the East-European steppe, and which ruled the Bulgars for over 250 years<sup>2</sup>, largely decreased by the turn of the IX<sup>th</sup>–X<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the reasons was that the migration of the Pecheneg to the West<sup>3</sup>, in consequence the position of the Khazars in the East-European steppe significantly shrunk; furthermore the Hungarians pushed into the Carpathian-basin,<sup>4</sup> thus the Khazars lost control of the Pontus-steppe trade too. The Pecheneg migration also rendered the trade in the neighborhood of the northern shores of the Black Sea<sup>5</sup> more difficult. On the other hand, the increasingly stronger Rus attacks directly endangered the commerce on the Fur-pass, which trade route granted the main source of revenue of Khazaria, and the Rus also menaced the Khazar homeland<sup>6</sup>. Additionally the Rus conquered many people who earlier paid tax to the Khazars, which also weakened the Khazar Khaqanate. As a consequence of these, the Khazar Khaqanate, which dominated the East-European steppe since the middle of the

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<sup>1</sup> Fjodorov-Davidov 1983. 7.

<sup>2</sup> As it is well known, the Khazar state attacked Kuvrat's realm, which was most likely located in the Dneper region in the 670's (Róna-Tas 2001. 68.). One part of the defeated Bulgar tribes fled to the West, whereas the other group surrendered to the Khazars (Czeplédy 1983. 57.; Zimonyi 1996, 944.).

<sup>3</sup> Vásáry 2003, 151.

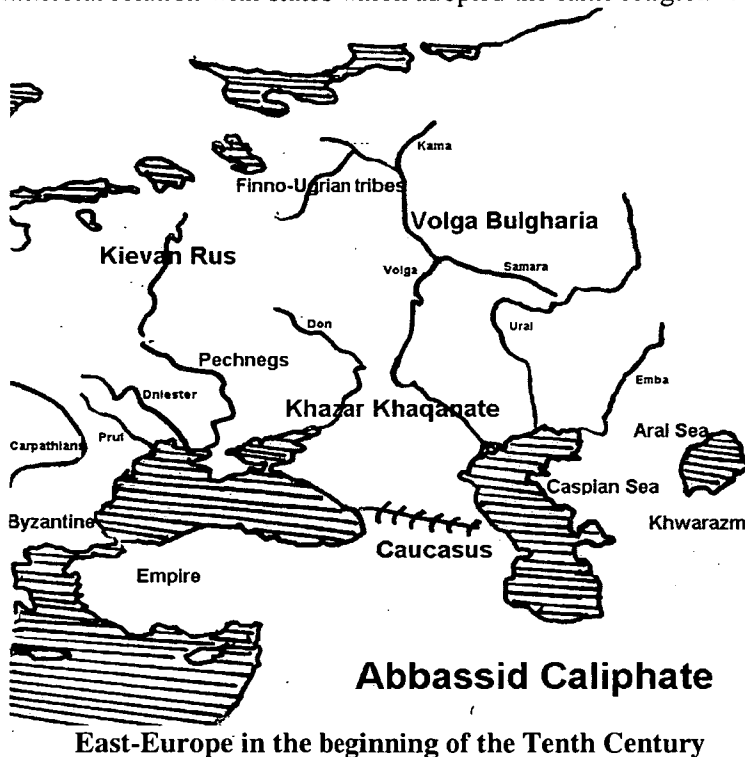
<sup>4</sup> Most of the researchers think that the direct cause of the Settlement of the Magyars was most likely the attack of the Hungarian hinterland in Etelköz, by the Pechenegs in 895. In 894, the Hungarians allied with the Byzantine Empire attacked the Danube Bulgarian state, which however leagued with the Pechenegs, who carried out a great destruction in the hinterland, which was without notable military force. Because this, without any other opportunity, the Hungarians migrated into the Carpathian-basin, which could be well defended (Róna-Tas 1996, 260–262.).

<sup>5</sup> Zimonyi 1994, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Vernadsky 1973, 33.

VII<sup>th</sup> century, became a decaying power by the X<sup>th</sup> century, not able to stop the independence efforts of the oppressed folks, for example the Volga Bulgars<sup>7</sup>.

The decision that the Bulghar ruler wanted to replace the previous tribal religions with a world religion was most probably merely a political, and not an ideological matter<sup>8</sup>. Joining a certain religion could cause numerous advantages since it obviously increased the ruler's power, prestige, and made it possible to unite his country too<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore he could develop a more favorable diplomatic and commercial relation with states which adopted the same religion<sup>10</sup>.



<sup>7</sup> The detachment aspiration of the Volga Bulgars was likely to get stronger after the overthrow of the Khazars by the Arabs in 767. At this time, taking advantage of the temporal vulnerability of Khazaria, the Bulgars draw to the East along the Volga, and they arrived to the strategically favorable Samara-curve around 750. Later the Volga Bulgars migrated along the right side of the Volga to the North, until they reached the territory bound by the Svijaga, the Kiljana, and the Volga. To the North, the Bulgars arrived to the Kama in the beginning of the IX<sup>th</sup> century (Róna-Tas 1996, 183–185.).

<sup>8</sup> Zimonyi 1994, 234.

<sup>9</sup> There were several other ethnical groups which belonged to the state of the Volga Bulgars, apart from the Bulgars, for example Sabirs, Slavs, and different Finno-Ugric tribes (Czeglédy 1944, 179–186). In which case the cohesion power of the common religion surely could moderate the strains inside the state (Golden 1990, 235–236.).

<sup>10</sup> Golden 1990, 237.

In the beginning of the X<sup>th</sup> century in the East-European steppe there were three big monotheist religions: the orthodox Christianity, the Islam, and the Judaism. These religions were unequivocally connected to different states, such as to the Byzantine Empire, the Baghdad Caliphate, and the Khazar Khaqanate.

Theoretically the Bulghar king could have chosen either religion, and could have made it the state religion or at least that of the ruling segment. However Almiş chose the Islam instead of the Christianity, or the Judaism. In this paper I want to present the factors which influenced the Volga Bulghar ruler to choose the Islam as official religion for his state.

The Bulghar state wanted to detach from the Khazar Khaqanate, which took the Judaism as state religion.<sup>11</sup>, and which country was an ally of the Byzantine Empire since the end of the VI<sup>th</sup>, the beginning of the VII<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>. The Khazars, who ruled the Volga Bulgars for centuries, in spite of their feebleness, still maintained their supremacy over the Bulgars. In this manner, the chance of the enrollment of the Judaism couldn't play a role in the decision of the Bulgars. The substantive possibilities were the Islam, and the Christianity. However the adoption of the Christianity was principally a theoretical possibility.

The Christian world power which remarkably influenced both culturally and politically the East-European steppe, was Byzantium. The East Roman and the Byzantine Empire with altering results put up a vigorous proselytization on the Pontus-steppe, and in the Caucasus region. On one hand, adopting the Christianity symbolized that that population accepted the superiority of Byzantium, whereat we can see many examples<sup>13</sup>, on the other hand the conversion improved and enlarged the interrelations. The Byzantine Empire, starting from Crimea also tried proselytization among the Khazars<sup>14</sup>. Because of this and due to the commercial relations, Christianity must have appeared among the Volga Bulgars.

Notwithstanding the interior erosion of the 'Abbassid Caliphate, individual realms which were principally under the authority of the caliph, were engaged in considerable missionary work on the steppe<sup>15</sup>. This is why in spite of the fact that the public level of proselytization was blocked at the feet of the Caucasus in the middle of the VIII<sup>th</sup> century<sup>16</sup>, merchants<sup>17</sup> principally from Khwārazm<sup>18</sup> and from the Samanids achieved a considerable level of proselytization among the nomad tribes<sup>19</sup>. It is very likely that the Bulgars, who

<sup>11</sup> To the proselytization of the khazars to Judaism see Golden 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Dobrovits 2004.; Ludwig 1982, 62–58.

<sup>13</sup> Fejős 2001, 36–44.

<sup>14</sup> Pletněva 1976, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Frye 1975, 144–161.

<sup>16</sup> Artamonov 1962, 224.

<sup>17</sup> Vásáry 2003, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Hauqal writes down, that the merchants from Khwārazm purchase beaver skins, and other valuable furs (Kmoskó 2000, 77.).

<sup>19</sup> Sinor 1969, 154.

were already in good relation with the Muslims in the period of the Arab-Khazar wars, became acquainted with the Islam very early<sup>20</sup> and it spread widely among them by the IX<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>. This factor must have seriously influenced the decision, which meant that the Volga Bulgars favored the Islam as the state religion.

The conversion to Islam was made easier by the fact that the favorable geographical position turned the Bulghar realm<sup>22</sup> into a commercial center. In the discussed period, the Volga Bulgars already practiced a huge commercial activity<sup>23</sup>, to the West, to the South, and to the East<sup>24</sup> as well. They made use of the different river transportation possibilities, especially that of the Volga. The trade of different furs was very important, and thanks to this, huge amount of dirhams streamed into Volga Bulgharia<sup>25</sup>. From the dirhams, which they gained in this way, the Bulgars could buy additional commodities from the Rus<sup>26</sup>, or for example from the Slavic tribes of the North, and they could dispose of these also with a large benefit<sup>27</sup>. To impose a levy on the transit commerce also resulted with good profitability, as Ibn Fādlan described it: *“When a boat comes from the country of the Khazars into the country of the Saqaliba, the king rides there, evaluates all that can be found on it, and takes the one tenth of everything. If Russians or other folk come here with slaves, the king has the right to choose one from every ten”*<sup>28</sup>. One of the most important commercial partners of the Bulgars was the Samanid Emirate whose merchants surely made a significant cultural and religious effect on the Volga Bulgar governing elite<sup>29</sup>. Moreover the bulgar merchants themselves could become acquainted with the Christianity in the Byzantine Empire, or trading with Christian merchants, and with the Islam, in the Muslim states. This must have affected the later proselyzation of the Volga Bulgars, because by means of the merchants, the Islam also could spread in Volga Bulgharia.

However the spreading of the Islam among the Volga Bulgars was not even. Ibn Fādlan informs that some 5000 Bulgars chose the Islam, and for them

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<sup>20</sup> Marwān Arabic general, the later caliph, in his campaign in 737, successfully defeated the main armies of the Khazar Khaganate, and forced the khāqān to adopt the Islam. Together with the khāqān, and his close escort, it is most likely that some Volga Bulgars also converted to Islam, but they kept their religion even after the Khazar leading parties changed to Judaism in the turn of the VIII<sup>th</sup>–IX<sup>th</sup> centuries (Golden 1983, 149.; Zimonyi 1990, 73.).

<sup>21</sup> Sinor 1969, 154.

<sup>22</sup> Zimonyi 1994, 238.

<sup>23</sup> Vásáry 2003, 125.; Kmoskó 1997, 206.

<sup>24</sup> The Volga Bulgar commerce connections expanded widely: from Khazaria to each point of the Muslim world, across the Byzantine Empire to China, and to India (Golden 1990, 238.; Polgár 2008, 57–59.).

<sup>25</sup> Noonan 1984, 154.; Polgár 2008, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Polgár 2008, 61.

<sup>27</sup> According to Al-Muqaddasī, for one marten-skin the buyers usually paid 2.4 dirhams (De Goeje 1906, 142.; Sinor 1969, 154.).

<sup>28</sup> Simon 2007, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Zimonyi 1994, 238.

a mosque was built where they can pray<sup>30</sup>. Later, some elements of the Ġayhānī-tradition reports the same: the Bulgars are Muslims, and they have mosque and an imam<sup>31</sup>. Ibn Fādlān reports that when he came to Bulgharia, there were already Muslims from the Caliphate. However we don't have information about the fact from when, and how many foreign Muslims lived on the lands of the Volga Bulgars, and what was their role in the life of the state. Among the tribes, the *Bulgār* is likely to have accepted the Islam, because their chieftain, who was at the same time the king of the Bulgars, adopted the Muslim religion<sup>32</sup>. But that was hardly general. Ibn Fādlān also notes, that for example the leader of the *Askal* tribe didn't accept the Islam, and he turned against the Bulgar king. Ibn Fādlān, when he reports us about the land of the Volga Bulgars points out, that even those Bulgars who already adopted the Islam don't know the correct religious instructions and rituals, in fact, in many questions even the muezzin's knowledge was very much incomplete<sup>33</sup>. These examples show clearly that although by the first decades the Islam stably put down roots among the Volga Bulgars, its permeation varied from tribe to tribe, and the common peoples' knowledge about the Islam was on an extremely low level.

Beyond that, as it could be seen in case of several other nations as well, Islamization among the Volga Bulgars at an early stage did not separate from the tribal religions, but it existed together with their beliefs and habits.

Christianity as an alternative however suffered a political defeat irrespectively from the spreading of the two religions. As far as the foreign relations were concerned, there were two main arguments supporting the Islam: the relations between Byzantium and Khazaria, and the internal affairs of the Byzantine Empire and the ʿAbbasid Caliphate.

By the beginning of the X<sup>th</sup> century, the power of the ʿAbbasid Caliphate largely decreased; the frontiers, which were nominally under the rule of the caliph liberated themselves from the central government<sup>34</sup>, so the territories which were indeed under the caliph, shrunk considerably. On the other side, during the period between the IX<sup>th</sup> from the XI<sup>th</sup> century, the Byzantine Empire got stronger<sup>35</sup>, its foreign policy became more active, among others, in the region of the Pontus-steppe too. However it was against the interests of the Bulgar king to join a religion, leading authority of which could interfere with the life of those countries which were formally under his rule. From this aspect, the caliph, who had an extraordinary prestige, but who was gradually loosing control over his empire<sup>36</sup>, and whose state was far enough from Volga Bulgharia seemed a perfect

<sup>30</sup> Simon 2007, 83.; Zimonyi 1990, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Göckenjan – Zimonyi 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Zimonyi 1994, 236.

<sup>33</sup> Simon 2007, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Cahen 1989, 240–280.

<sup>35</sup> Ostrogorsky 2001, 203–251.

<sup>36</sup> Hitti 1960, 450–473.

choice. According to Ibn Fādlān<sup>37</sup>, the Bulghar king was perfectly aware of this: “*what do you think, if the caliph –Allah lengthen his existence- will send an army against me, could he defeat me*” “*No*” I said<sup>38</sup>. Beyond the physical distance, the king found the reason for this in the many, sometimes hostile tribes, who lived between the two empires<sup>39</sup>. However the distance, which made the caliph’s authority formal, at the same time excluded the chance of any support from the new allies in case the Volga Bulgars entered into an armed conflict with their neighbors<sup>40</sup>. Because of these geographical reasons, the caliphates’ political and cultural influence also could not prevail in the country of the Bulgars.

In the discussed period, because of their strained relations with the Khazar Khaqanate, the Volga Bulgars would have rather needed an ally, which could have given them an effective support. It shows their subjugation, that they had to pay a sable as a tribute after every house in the realm to the Kazar khāqān<sup>41</sup>. Ibn Fādlān notes that the khāqān kept the son of the Bulghar king as a hostage<sup>42</sup>, furthermore the king had to give his daughter to the khāqān, and the girl died there<sup>43</sup>. In spite of Almiš’s reluctance, Ibn Fādlān explains the reason why the Volga Bulgars established diplomatic relations with the caliph: “*It was the fear from the Khazar king that motivated the king of the Saqaliba to write to the sultan, and ask him to build a fortress to the king*”<sup>44</sup>.

The Bulgars were unambiguously devoted to the fortress as the cornerstone of the defense against the Khazars. Whereas Ibn Fādlān also reports that after they presented to the Volga Bulghar king, that the delegates asked a sum from the caliph<sup>45</sup>, he did not take the 4000 dinars, and later the king explained it as follows: “*If I wished to build a fortress from my own sources let that be gold, or silver, it would not have caused me any difficulty.*”<sup>46</sup> Later the king added that principally he didn’t want the money, but he wanted the blessing from the caliph to reach him<sup>47</sup>. After all it is evident, that the Volga Bulghar king needed the experts from the Baghdad Caliphate to build the fortress.

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<sup>37</sup> As a member of al-Muqtadir caliph’s delegation, Ibn Fādlān left Baghdad on the 21st June 921, and after almost one year of journey, he arrived to the Volga Bulghar capital, Bolğar. During the mission, he gave a detailed description about the road into the land of the Bulgars, and about the life of the neighboring folks. The description about the road back wasn’t found yet. See the translation of his work in Hungarian: R. Simon: *Ibn Fadlān - Beszámoló a volgai bolgárok földjén tett utazásról*. Budapest 2007. In German: A. Z. V. Togan: *Ibn Fadlan’s Reisebericht*. Leipzig 1939. The Russian : A. P. Kovalevskij: *Kniga Axmeda ibn Fadlana o ergo putešestvii na Volgu v 921-922 gg.* Xar’kov 1956.

<sup>38</sup> Simon 2007, 53.

<sup>39</sup> Simon 2007, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Zimonyi 1994, 237.

<sup>41</sup> Simon 2007, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Simon 2007, 82.

<sup>43</sup> Simon 2007, 83.

<sup>44</sup> Simon 2007, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Simon 2007, 50–51.

<sup>46</sup> Simon 2007, 83.

<sup>47</sup> Simon 2007, 83.

It seems likely, that the orientation of the Bulghar politics towards the Baghdad Caliphate, was influenced by the approach of the Rus towards the Byzantine Empire. The Rus state, established in the IX<sup>th</sup> century, changed its earlier hostile politics against Byzantium<sup>48</sup> by the first half of the X<sup>th</sup> century. Commercial relationships played a just as important role as Byzantine proselytization attempts among the Rus. The trade contract, signed in Constantinople on the 2nd of September, 911<sup>49</sup>, most probably came to the knowledge of the Volga Bulghar ruler, because the Bulgars were on a large scale commercial contact with some Rus groups. As for a time the Byzantine-Rus relations normalized in this way, the political latitude of the Bulgars largely decreased, since both from the East, and from the West their country was surrounded by states which were in the allurements range of the Byzantine Empire. The only outbreak chance was the adoption of the Islam, and the formal recognition of the caliph's rule.

The conversion to the Islam demanded a certain level of development. In the beginning of the X<sup>th</sup> century, the Volga Bulgars were nomads<sup>50</sup>, and their economy was dominated by husbandry. According to Ibn Fādlān, the Bulghar king not only lived in yurts with his family<sup>51</sup>, but he lived in different places in the summer, and different in the winter, which was an established custom among the nomadic peoples<sup>52</sup>.

It also shows the level of development, that the king collected the tax in natural goods instead of cash as inland cash circulation was very poor<sup>53</sup>. The Bulgars ruled the surrounding Slavic tribes, in connection with which Ibn Fādlān mentions four kings, who serve the Bulghar king<sup>54</sup>. However these kings are most likely four Bulghar chieftains<sup>55</sup>.

We can summarize that the proselytization of the Volga Bulgars was a remarkable event both politically and religiously at the beginning of the X<sup>th</sup> century. During the next centuries, until their state was destroyed by the Mongols in the first part of the XII<sup>th</sup> century<sup>56</sup>, the Bulgars significantly influenced the history of the East-European steppe. It is undoubtedly true, that both the Volga Bulghar king and the 'Abbassid Caliph benefited from the enrollment of the Islam. In this way, the Bulghar monarch, acknowledging the formal rule of the caliph, could break out from that political isolation which marked his country, under the rule of the Khazar Kaganate. Taking the Muslim faith as the state-

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<sup>48</sup> Obolensky 1999, 225–226.

<sup>49</sup> Obolensky 1999, 230.

<sup>50</sup> Zimonyi 1990, 176.

<sup>51</sup> Simon 2007, 62.

<sup>52</sup> Zimonyi 1990, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Of course it is not just the poorly developed inside money circulation that played a role, but as mentioned, the Volga Bulgars could sell the furs at a good price (Golden 1990, 238.).

<sup>54</sup> Simon 2007, 45.

<sup>55</sup> Zimonyi 1994, 236.

<sup>56</sup> Vásáry 2003.

religion allowed the Volga Bulgars, to detach themselves from Khazaria. The Islam also proved very useful for the inside consolidation and unification of the state. Apart from the aboves, Almiş's decision had a good affect on the economical and political connections with the nearby Muslim states, especially the Samanids. It was also quite important, that since the Khazars were in vain in a good commerce relation with the caliphate, the Khazars were still allies to the enemy of the 'Abbassid's; the Byzantine Empire.

As far as the 'Abbassid caliph and the Muslim countries which were close to Volga Bulgaria were concerned, the Bulgars' proselytization meant that they finally achieved what they tried in vain during the Arab-Khazar wars: a Muslim state appeared in the East-European steppe.

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