

International Trade and Political Centres in Eastern Europe in the Ninth–Tenth Centuries¹

SZABOLCS POLGÁR



This paper is based on a chapter of my PhD-dissertation, which focuses on the correlation of the trade and the political centres in Eastern Europe from the end of the eighth to the end of tenth century. Eastern Europe comprises a large territory stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Caucasian mountains and from the Carpathian Mountains to the Volga and Kama rivers. The history of Eastern Europe is characterized by great migrations in the period between the decline of the Huns in the middle of the fifth century and the Bulgarian conquest of the Balkans at the end of the seventh century. The Oghurs, Onoghurs, Saraghurs migrated to Eastern Europe around 463. Kutrighurs, Utighurs were mentioned north of the Black Sea in the sixth century. The Avars conquered the Carpathian Basin in 568. The Türk Kaghanate extended his power to eastern Europe including the Crimea in the second half of the sixth century. In the first half of the seventh century emerged Kuvrat khan's Bulgaria north of the Black Sea and the Khazar Kaghanate north of the Caucasus as a successor state of the western Türk Kaghanate. The latter conquered the territory of Kuvrat's empire after his death around 665. The Khazar Kaghanate became the dominant power of Eastern Europe from the end of the seventh century till the end of the tenth century.² The fate of the nomadic tribal confederations and empires of Eastern Europe was determined by the events of the whole Central Asian steppe-belt. Be-

¹ Cf. Sz. Polgár, *Kelet-Európa és a nemzetközi kereskedelem a 8–10. században*. [Eastern Europe and the international trade in the eighth–tenth centuries] Szeged 2006 (Manuscript).

² E. g. R. Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes. A History of Central Asia*. tr. N. Walford, New Brunswick 1970, 78–79, 171–182; M. I. Artamonov, *Istorija hazar*. [The History of the Khazars] Leningrad 1962, 62–112; P. B. Golden, "The peoples of the South Russian steppes" in D. Sinor, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge–New York 1990, 256–270; P. B. Golden, "Nomads of the Western Eurasian Steppes: Oğurs, Onoğurs and Khazars" in *History of the Turkic Peoples in the Pre-Islamic Period*, ed. H. R. Roemer, W. E. Scharlipp, *Philologiae et Historiae Turcicae Fundamenta* 1, Berlin 2000, 282–295.

sides, the Slavic speaking tribes of the Eastern European forest zone must be taken into consideration in the early medieval history of Eastern Europe.

The Eastern European nomadic empires were connected with the neighbouring sedentary civilizations, i.e. the Roman, later the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian Persia, then the Caliphate. The Arab conquest radically changed the political situation in Persia, Central Asia and Caucasus in the second half of the seventh century and at the beginning of the eighth century. The Khazars and the Caliphate waged frequent wars against each other in the first half of the eighth century. The Byzantine Empire entered in alliance with the Khazars to counterbalance of the pressure of the Caliphate. The Khazar court was interested in the Byzantine alliance against the Muslims, but the cooperation was menaced by the conflict in the Crimea, as the Khazars conquered a few Byzantine towns in the Eastern part of the Crimea at the end of the seventh century.³ István Zimonyi has adopted a theory of Thomas Barfield on the rise of the nomadic empires in connection with the prospering periods of China.⁴ Zimonyi has compared the relationships between the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine Empire) and the eastern European nomadic empires: the Huns, Avars and Khazars. The Huns and Avars wrung a considerable quantity of gold from the Empire, but the rise and prosperity of Khazaria based on the military power and the commercial taxes.⁵ It is worth mentioning that the Khazars got also gifts (gold) from Byzantium in the 8th century, it was a wonted way in the relationship between the Empires and the eastern European nomads.⁶

There was a turning point began in trade contacts of Eastern Europe at the end of the eighth century. Eastern Europe took more considerable part in the world trade in the ninth and tenth centuries than in the earlier ones. It was the period of flourishing trade. The Khazars played a key role in the international trade, since they controlled the main commercial routes. The north-south route system was the Fur Road, which led from the eastern European forest zone to Byzantium and the Caliphate including the Volga-Kama route and the Dnieper route. The other

³ E.g., A. Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea*. Cambridge, Ma 1936, 76–87; Th. S. Noonan, "Why dirhams first reached Russia: the role of Arab-Khazar relations in the development of the earliest Islamic trade with Eastern Europe," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* (=AEMA) 4 (1984), 223, 227–228, 231, A. I. Ajbabin, *Etničeskaja istorija rannevizantijskogo Kryma – Etnische Geschichte der frühbyzantinischen Krim*, Simfereopol' 1999, 185–190.

⁴ Th. Barnfield, *The Perilous Frontier. Nomadic Empires and China*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd. Cambridge–Oxford 1992.

⁵ I. Zimonyi, *Muslimische Quellen über die Ungarn vor der Landnahme. Das Ungarische Kapitel der Ġaihāni-Tradition*. Gabriel Schäfer Verlag, Herne 2006, 96–97.

⁶ Cf. Th. S. Noonan, Byzantium and the Khazars: a special relationship? in J. Shepard, S. Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy*. Aldershot 1992, 120.; S. A. Naumenko, S. I. Bezuglov, *Új bizánci és iráni importleletek a Don-vidék sztyeppéiről*. [New Finds of Byzantine and Iranian Import into the Steppes of the Don Region] *A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve*. *Studia Archaeologica* 3 (1996), 247–257.; A. V. Komar, *Predsaltovskie i rannesaltovskij gorizont Vostočnoj Evropy (voprosy hronologii)* *Vita Antiqua* 2 (1999), 111–136: <http://archeology.kiev.ua/pub/komar.htm>

route was the east-western part of the Silk Road.⁷ The Volga route and the Silk Road crossed each other in the Lower Volga region. It is no accident that the new capital of the Khazars was set up there as a consequence of the Arab-Khazar wars.

The incomes of the Khazar Kaghanate derived from three sources: 1) taxes or rates, 2) customs duties, 3) services. The Khazars could have share in the profit of the trade in several ways:

- 1) Direct commercial duties of the merchants coming from foreign countries (commercial tithe).
- 2) The merchants paid tribute to the ruler, they lived among the Khazars and took part in commerce. They presumably exported furs and other precious goods to the Islamic countries.
- 3) The peoples of the Khazar Kaghanate paid tribute in furs etc.

Ibn Fadlān recorded that the Volga Bulgars paid a pelt of sable from every house to the Khazar ruler in 922.⁸ According to the Russian Primary Chronicle the Khazars laid tax on furs among the different Slavic speaking tribes.⁹ There are accounts on the trade of the Hungarians living under the influence of the Khazars, but there is no information on fur trade of them.¹⁰ Probably they were not engaged in the fur trade, it was a monopoly of the Khazars. The Hungarians sold captives to the Byzantines and the Khazars got the furs as tax from their Slavic subjects.¹¹

Noonan estimated that 150–300 tons of silver were exported from the Islamic world to Eastern Europe and ca. half a million furs was exported from the Eastern European forest zone during the tenth century.¹² It was an enormous quantity.

The favourable position of the Khazar Kaghanate did not last long, as two new states emerged which became rivals of the Khazars: the Rus' and the Volga Bulgars at the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth century. The early history of the Rus' can be connected with the migrations of Scandinavians into

⁷ E.g. Noonan, *Why dirhams first reached Russia*, 249–282.

⁸ A. Kmietowicz–F. Kmietowicz–T. Lewicki, *Źródła arabskie do dziejów słowiańszczyzny*. [Arab sources on the deeds of the Slavs] Vol. 3, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź 1985, 66; A. Z. V. Togan, *Ibn Fadlān's Reisebericht*. Leipzig 1939, 80; A. P. Kovalevskij, *Kniga Ahmeda Ibn Fadlana o ego putesestvii na Volgu 921–922 gg.* [Ibn Fadlan's report on the voyage in the Volga region in 921–922 A. D.] Har'kov 1956, 140.

⁹ *Povesť Vremennyh Let*. 1. [The Tale of Bygone Years] Per. D. S. Lihačev–B. A. Romanov, Red. V. P. Adrianova-Peretc, Moskva–Leningrad 1950, 18 (text), 214 (transl.).

¹⁰ H. Göckenjan, I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter. Die Ġayhānī-Tradition*. Wiesbaden 2001, 74 (Ibn Rusta), 177 (Gardizi), 252 (al-Marwazi).

¹¹ Zimonyi, *Muslimische Quellen*, 255.

¹² Th. S. Noonan, "Volga Bulghāriā's tenth-century trade with Sāmānid Central Asia," *AEMA* 11 (2000–2001), 140–218. 2001; R. K. Kovalev, "The infrastructure of the Northern part of the „Fur Road” between the Middle Volga and the East during the Middle Ages," *AEMA* 11 (2000–2001), 33–34.

Northern Russia. The different groups of Scandinavians began to settle in the forest zone of North Western Russia from the eighth century. Their earliest centre was beside the Lake Ladoga in the ninth century.¹³ The commercial boom in Eastern Europe had an attraction for the commercial activity of the Rus'. The Rus' merchants travelled frequently to Kherson, a city in the south western part of the Crimean Peninsula and Constantinople. The other road led via Volga Bulgharia to Khazaria along the Volga. They sold their merchandise in the towns of Bulgharia and Khazaria, but reached occasionally the Southern coast of the Caspian Sea and Iraq. The eastern trade of the Rus' was under the control of the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars, so the Rus' merchants had to pay commercial tithe.¹⁴

The other new state was Volga Bulgharia, a vassal of Khazaria up to 922. The Volga Bulgars formed from different tribes migrating from the South Russian steppes to the region of the confluence the Volga and Kama rivers. The earliest reports on the Volga Bulgars were recorded in the second half of the ninth century in Muslim geographical literature.¹⁵

From the end of the ninth century there were a few events, which contributed to the decline of the Khazar power under Eastern Europe. The first of them was the migration of the Pechenegs in the middle of the 890s. The Pechenegs lived in the Kazakh steppe in the ninth century. In 893 the Samanid emir waged war against the Karluks and defeated them, which put an end of the political balance in the Kazakh steppe, the former vassals of the Karluks, the Kimeks and Oghuz established new states. The Oghuz tribes expanded their power to their western neighbours, the Pechenegs and expelled them from the Kazakh steppe. The Pechenegs entered by force into the South Russian steppes and routed the Hungarians who were allies of the Khazars.¹⁶ The Khazars lost the control over the steppe region between the Don and Danube rivers. The Pechenegs did not submit to the Khazars. The withdrawal of the Hungarians from the middle Dnieper region was favourable for the political activity of the Rus'. Prince Oleg conquered Kiev in the forest steppe zone, which became capital of the Rus' state.¹⁷ The au-

¹³ E.g., J. Callmer „From West to East. The Penetration of Scandinavians into Eastern Europe cca. 500–900,” in *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, eds. M. Kazanski, A. Nercessian, C. Zuckerman, *Réalités Byzantines* 7, Paris 2000, 45–94; W. Duczko, *Viking Rus. Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe*. Leiden–Boston 2004, 60–70.

¹⁴ O. Pritsak, “An Arabic Text on the Trade Route of the Corporation of ar-Rus in the Second Half of the Ninth Century,” *Folia Orientalia* 12 (1970) [1971], 256–257.

¹⁵ I. Zimonyi, *The Origins of the Volga Bulgars*. Studia Uralo-Altica 32, Szeged 1990.

¹⁶ I. Zimonyi, “A besenyők nyugatra vándorlásának okai,” [On the westward migration of the Pechenegs] *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis. Acta Historica* 106 (1998), 129–144.

¹⁷ E. g. S. Franklin, J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200*. London–New York 1996, 93–107; M. Font, „A magyar kalandozások és a kelet-európai viking terjeszkedés,” [Military expeditions of the Hungarians and the Viking expansion in Eastern Europe] in *Nomád népvándorlások, magyar honfoglalás* [Nomadic migrations, Hungarian conquest] eds. Sz. Felföldi, B. Sinkovics, *Magyar Őstörténeti Könyvtár* 15, Budapest 2001, 99; I. Bóna, *A magyarok és Európa a 9–10. században*. [The Hungarians and Europe in the ninth–tenth centuries] *História Könyvtár, Monográfiák* 12, Budapest 2000, 23.

thor of the Russian Primary Chronicle recorded that Prince Oleg imposed tax on the Slavic speaking tribes of the middle Dnieper and Oka region such as the Drevlians, Severians and Radimiches.¹⁸ It means that the Khazars lost the control in the forest zone and forest steppe zone between the Dnieper and the Upper Volga, that is the western region of the furs.

The next step in declining the Khazar empire was the secession of the Volga Bulgharia from the Khazar Kaghanate. The Bulghar king, Almish converted to Islam officially in 922 and minted own silver coins. It was a symbolical act of the independence. Abū Hāmid al-Garnāti recorded in the twelfth century that the Khazar kaghan sent an army to the Volga Bulgharia to submit the Bulghar king after the embrace of Islam, but the Bulgars defended themselves. According to Abū Hāmid this account was recorded in the chronicle of the Volga Bulgars.¹⁹ Apart from this account there is no mentioned on hostility between the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars. The basic difficulty for the Khazars was losing control over the peoples of the middle Volga region including the forest zone, another home of furs. The region of the Oka river, which is only a part of the forest zone between the Rus' and the Volga Bulgars, remained under Khazar control, until Prince Sviatoslav conquered this region in 964 according to the Russian Primary Chronicle.²⁰ The Khazar influence in the Oka region before 964 is also attested in the Hebrew „letter of Joseph”, but it was a small and insignificant region compared with the other lost territories.²¹ Another setback for the Khazars was the boom of the direct land route between Central Asia (Khwarezm and Khorasan, the Samanid Emirate) and the Volga Bulgharia. There is a detailed description of this route in the report of Ibn Fadlān who was the secretary of the embassy sent by the Caliph from Baghdad to the king of the Volga Bulgars in 921.²² It made possible for the Bulgars to trade directly with the Central Asian Islamic states without paying tax to the Khazar king.

The reduction of the lands of furs caused the lowering of the commercial incomes in the Khazar Empire. Muslim authors mentioned that the Khazar mercenary troops did not get enough salary in the middle of the tenth century.²³ The

¹⁸ *Povest' Vremennyh Let*, 20–21 (text), 217 (transl.).

¹⁹ O. G. Bol'šakov, A. L. Mongajt, *Putešestvie Abu Hamida al-Garnati v Vostočnuju i Central'nuju Evropu (1131–1153 gg.)*. [The journey of Abu Hamid al-Garnati in Eastern and Central Europe] Moskva 1971, 31; I. L. Izmajlov, „Načala istorii' Volžskoj Bulgarii v predanii i istoričeskoj tradicii,” [‘Early History’ of Volga Bulgharia in the legend and the Historical tradition] in *Drevnejšie Gosudarstva Vostočnoj Evropy* (1998 g.) Otv. red. T. M. Kalinina, Moskva 2000, 101.

²⁰ *Povest' Vremennyh Let* 1, 46–47 (text), 244 (transl.).

²¹ P. K. Kokovcov, *Evrejsko-khazarskaja perepiska v 10 veke*. [Jewish–Khazar correspondence in the tenth century] Leningrad 1932, 98 (“long version”).

²² Knietowicz et al., *Źródła arabskie do dziejów słowiańszczyzny*, 26–47; Togan, *Ibn Fadlān's Reisebericht*, 17–39; Kovalevskij, *Kniga Ahmeda Ibn Fadlana*, 121–131.

²³ Al-Istahri: *Viae regnorum Descriptio dittonis moslemicae auctore Abu Ishak al-Farisi al-Istakhri*. ed. M. J. De Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*. Tomus 1, Lugduni Batavorum 1870, 221; Ibn Hawqal, *Opus geographicum auctore Ibn Haukal*. ed. J. H.

expansive ambition of the Kievan Rus' increased in the 960s under the reign of prince Sviatoslav. The Khazar-Rus' relations were peaceful up to this time. At the beginning of the tenth century the Khazars let the Rus' troops pass through to Khazaria to attack the South Caspian region. Around 960 Khazar king prevented the Rus' crossing the territory of the Kaghanate. In 964 Prince Sviatoslav conquered the Slavic speaking Viaticians who paid tribute to the Khazars. Then the Rus' defeated the Khazars in 965 and 969.²⁴ The fall of the Khazar Kaghanate meant that the Volga Bulgars take their role in the trade with the East, but the volume of the trade was reduced at the beginning of the eleventh century. Neither the Bulgars nor the Rus' could control the entire Volga route. The Oghuz gained control over the lower Volga after the fall of the Khazar Empire.

In conclusion, the dominant power of Eastern Europe was the Khazar Kaghanate in the ninth and tenth centuries and its existence was based on the international trade. The Volga Bulgars and the Rus' became rivals of Khazaria in the tenth century. The Bulgars and the Rus' lived in the forest zone and they gained control over the land of furs. The Khazars lost the main basis of the incomes and led to the decline of the kaghanate.

Kramers. *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*. Tomus II. Pars secunda. Lugduni Batavorum 1939 (2d edn.), 390; J. H. Kramers, G. Wiet, intr., trad., *Ibn Hauqal: Configuration de la terre*. Beyrouth-Paris 1964, 380.

²⁴ *Povest' Vremennyh Let*. 1, 47 (text), 244 (transl.); T. M. Kalinina, „Svedenija Ibn Haukalja o pohodah Rusi vremen Svjatoslava“ [Ibn Hawqal's reports on the expeditions of the Rus under the reign of Prince Sviatoslav] in *Drevnejsie gosudarstva na territorii SSSR. Materialy i issledovanija* 1975 g. Moskva 1976, 90-101.; A. P. Novoselcev, *Hazarское gosudarstvo i ego rol' v istorii Vostočnoj Evropy i Kavkaza*. [The Khazar state and its role in the history of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus] Moskva 1990, 219-227.