

WESTERN SOURCES ON THE EARLY TOWNS OF THE MIDDLE VOLGA REGION

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The article aims at summarising the evidence of European sources concerning the towns of the Middle Volga region. First, the Hungarian Anonymus's *Gesta Ungarorum* is scrutinised, then the Western travellers' accounts are considered. The result is that prior to the 14th century only *Bulgar*, the capital of Volga Bulgaria was known to medieval West. In the second part of the paper the works of 14th–15th-century European cartography are investigated. The names and locations of three towns (Bulgar, Kremenčuk and Jüketau) are dealt with in detail. The final conclusion is that these maps, though they are precious contemporary sources, must be handled with special caution and criticism.

Key words: Volga Bulgaria, towns, cartography, travellers, Bulgar, Kremenčuk, Jüketau.

1. The Middle Volga region had been inhabited by Finno-Ugric peoples for long centuries when the first Bulgaro-Turkic groups arrived, probably not earlier than the 8th century AD. For the 1200 years that have elapsed since the first Turkic settlers' appearance, the Middle Volga region has become an important centre of Turkic peoples and cultures. Without the knowledge of the Bulgars, the Tatars, and the Bashkirs one cannot claim to have got acquainted with the whole Turkic world. Though falling under the suzerainty of different states (Volga Bulgaria, the Golden Horde, the Kazan and other Tatar Khanates, and finally the Russian state) and comprising various peoples and ethnic groups, the Middle Volga region has always represented a special amalgam consisting of different geographical, socio-economic and cultural factors. The existence of such an amalgam enables us to speak of this region as a separate geopolitical unit in history.

The Middle Volga region lay far from the European Christian civilisation both geographically and culturally. It joined the Islamic world in the 10th century (cf. Ibn Faḍlān's travel to Volga Bulgaria on behalf of the Caliphate to strengthen Islam in the Volga region). In addition, its western neighbours were the Russians who approximately at the same time (9th–10th century) embraced Eastern Christianity. Thus for

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medieval Europe the far-away region of the Middle Volga, considering the possibilities of contemporary means of transport and information, was practically unknown. It is not by chance that, in addition to the Arabic and Persian sources, the Russian annals yielded the first serious sources of Volga Bulgaria from the 11th–13th centuries. Before the turmoil of the Mongol conquest in the 13th century western sources were practically tacit concerning Volga Bulgaria. The first serious, first-hand accounts on it derived from the pens of Hungarian Dominican missionaries who in the 1230s launched their missionary travels to the Volga region.

But prior to the travel accounts of these travellers we can cull interesting data from the *Gesta Ungarorum* of the Hungarian Anonymus, notary of King Béla III which shed some light on Volga Bulgaria in the 12th century. Anonymus who wanted to relate the events of the Hungarian “conquest of the land” in the 9th century, is famous for projecting the persons and events of his age (i.e. the 12th century) into the 9th–10th-century early Hungarian history. In Chapter 57 of his work he says that in Prince Taksony’s time: “Many guests flocked to him from different nations. Namely, some very noble lords whose names were Billa and Bocsu arrived with many Ismaelites from the land of the Bulars. The Prince [i.e. Taksony] granted them lands in different parts of Hungary, moreover he gave them for good the fortress called Pest ... At the same time a certain noble soldier arrived from the same land whose name was Heten, and the Prince granted him many lands and other possessions.” (*multi hospites confluebant ad eum ex diversis nationibus. Nam de terra Bular venerunt quidam nobilissimi domini cum magna multitudine Hismahelitarum, quorum nomina fuerunt Billa et Bocsu, quibus / dux per diversa loca Hungarorum condonavit terras et insuper castrum, quod dicitur Pest, in perpetuum concessit. ... Et eodem tempore de eadem regione venit quidam nobilissimus miles nomine Heten, cui etiam dux terras et alias possessiones non / modicas condonavit*) (Szentpétery 1937, pp. 114–116). It is evident that Anonymus relates an event pertaining to the 12th century. Prince Taksony, who was the grandfather of King Stephen I of Hungary and lived in the 10th century, is out of place here. Billa and Bocsu were immigrants from Volga Bulgaria who settled in Hungary. The Muslim immigrants of Hungary in the 12th century were called *Ismaelitae* or *Sarraceni* in the Latin sources while their Hungarian name was *böszörmény* meaning simply ‘Muslim’ (cf. Old Russian *busurman*, *busurmane*). They came mainly from Volga Bulgaria and Khwarezm, the Old-Hungarian name of the latter was *káliz* (cf. the same word in *Xvalisskoe more*, the Old-Russian term for the Caspian Sea). These Muslim immigrants in medieval Hungary were mainly merchants who became involved in the finances of the royal court and sometimes played a prominent role in the life of the country. Billa and Bocsu arrived from the land of the Bulgars (“de terra Bular”, i.e. Volga Bulgaria). It is uniquely interesting that Anonymus preserved the form *Bular* typical of a Bulgarian (i.e. Chuvash-type) form which is known also from the *Secret History of the Mongols*. Its palatal form *Büler/Biler* was the name of a town which became the capital of Volga Bulgaria instead of *Bulgar* in the second half of the 13th century (Russian *Biljarsk*).

The same palatal form *Büler* is preserved in the name of the Bashkir clan *Büler*.¹ In brief, Anonymus' narrative preserved an interesting detail concerning the Volga Bulgars' settlement in 12th-century Hungary.

2. After Anonymus had completed his text, a few decades later Hungarian Dominican missionaries set out to the east to gather information about the imminent Tatar invasion and to find the remnants of the Hungarians who were left in the east before the bulk of Hungarians migrated to the Carpathian Basin at the end of the 9th century. The most famous member of these expeditions, Brother Julian participated in two missions. The first one took place in 1235–1236, the second one in 1237. Julian was the first to get into Volga Bulgaria and gain first-hand knowledge of the Mongols and the Eastern Hungarians living within the confines of Volga Bulgaria. His travel experiences were preserved in two documents: the first one is the so-called Riccardus Report compiled by a certain Riccardus of Julian's first journey, and the Julian Letter written by Julian himself. Both documents contain valuable data concerning the Tatar invasion and the geopolitical situation of the age. Interestingly Julian could not reach Volga Bulgaria for the second time in 1237 since it was destroyed and occupied by the Mongol forces after his first departure from there in 1236.

In the wake of the Dominican missionaries new envoys were sent to the representatives of the new Tatar power. In 1245–1247 John of Plano Carpini and in 1254–1257 Guillaume Rubruc made extensive journeys in the new Tatar realm, and we owe two extremely precious travel accounts to them. Plano Carpini's *Ystoria Mongalorum* and Rubruc's *Itinerarium* are indispensable sources for a better understanding of the Tatar world in the 13th century. They contain also a good deal of information concerning Volga Bulgaria, but the travellers themselves did not personally visit the Middle Volga region. They call Volga Bulgaria *Magna Bulgaria* since they thought erroneously that it was the primordial homeland of the Danube Bulgarians. The only western traveller who, after Julian and the Hungarian Dominicans visited Volga Bulgaria, was Marco Polo. He was in the capital *Bulgar* which he calls *Bular* (the same Chuvash form as in Anonymus' *Gesta*).

Western travellers, even if they personally visited Volga Bulgaria, failed to mention any town of the country besides the capital *Bulgar*. It may have the simple reason that it was the only town they stayed in. It was easily attainable through the Volga and they did not continue their journey further to the north or in the mainland of Zakam'e and/or Predkam'e. Other larger towns along the Volga and the Kama were interesting only for merchants, mainly Muslim and Russian, so most Bulgarian towns remained outside the circle of knowledge of the European Christian world. It can be assumed with safety that prior to the 1300s, out of some fifteen towns of Volga Bulgaria, only the name of the country as *Bulgaria* and the name of its capital as *Bulgar/Bular* were known to the medieval West.

¹ On the form *Bular*, see Ligeti (1986, pp. 31–32).

3. Early European cartography of the 14th–15th centuries is the third major group of western sources concerning the towns of the Volga region. In comparison with the first two groups, these sources are much richer in place-names, and they abound especially in names of towns. These maps drew on several sources. Naturally, they knew and utilised the well-known travel accounts of the former period: the Riccardus Report, the Julian Letter, the works of Plano Carpini, Rubruc, and Marco Polo, but they had other sources as well at their disposal since there is a considerable amount of names that cannot be found elsewhere. Most probably they drew on personal oral accounts of missionaries and merchants as well. Practically only these two types of travellers existed at that time. The evidence of these sources have been utilised in Russian historiography in a pioneering way by F. Brun, learned professor of the Novorossijskij Universitet in Odessa and F. Čekalin, indefatigable local scholar of Saratov and Saratovskij kraj (Brun 1873; 1879/1880; Čekalin 1889; 1890). Recently, J. Tardy (1982, pp. 179–236) and V. Egorov (1985, pp. 130–139) also made use of these cartographic data, but a really systematic research into the cartographic material is ahead of us. This time let me refer only to a few of the most important maps of the 14th–15th centuries and demonstrate on a few names of towns the value of these sources.

The basic aim of the first maps called portolans was to help navigation, so they designated all the important sea ports in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The world maps extended their interests also to the inner parts of the continents. It is not by chance that most early works of cartography were done by Italians and Spaniards, sons of the greatest nautical nations. The first dated marine map was that of the Genoese Petrus Vesconte from 1311. There are three more compass maps by Vesconte dated 1311, 1313 and 1318. The disc-shaped world map of Fra Paolino Minorita done in 1320 shows great similarity to Vesconte's world map. The Venetian brothers Francesco and Marco Pizigano made a portolan in 1367 which contains many names unattested elsewhere. It contains the names of approximately 40 towns in the territory of the Golden Horde, most of them situated on or near the Volga river, so it is one of the most precious maps for our purposes. All towns are designated by a special sign: three bastions are connected with a wall. The two most important and largest towns, Saray and Urgench are signed with four bastions. Above the signs of a few towns small flags are drawn. The Pizigano map is the most detailed one bearing on the Golden Horde, but not the earliest one. The Catalan map of Angelino Dulcert made in Mallorca in 1339, and a portolan of an unknown author from 1351 contain precious data on the Golden Horde, but they are less detailed than the Pizigano map. The so-called Catalan Atlas was made by Abraham Cresques in Mallorca in 1375. Abraham Cresques drew his maps to the order of Pedro III, King of Aragon. It is important to stress that Mallorca was under Arab suzerainty up till 1248, so Arab geography may have had a direct impact on Mallorcan cartography. Besides, the Kingdom of Aragon pursued indirect trade with the Volga region via the Black Sea, consequently Mallorcan merchants had a first-hand information of these territories. Last but not least mention must be made of the best products of 15th-century cartography, the works of Fra Mauro, the Camaldolite monk who lived on the island of

Murano in Venice. He has a portolan preserved in the Vatican and a famous world map from 1459. The latter undoubtedly represents the finest piece of medieval cartography.

First, I will deal with the evidence of the maps on Bulgar, capital of Volga Bulgaria, then representations of two towns (*Kremenčuk* and *Ĵüketau*) will be treated. Seemingly the greatest problem for medieval historiographers and cartographers was the existence of two Bulgarias, namely Danube Bulgaria and Volga Bulgaria. Sometimes, as we shall see soon, one cannot decide with any certainty whether they wanted to refer to Danube Bulgaria or Volga Bulgaria. The situation was further complicated by the learned theory of the Middle Ages that Volga Bulgaria was considered the primordial homeland of the Danube Bulgars, hence it was called Magna Bulgaria, i.e. the original, pristine land of the Bulgars. Another source of confusion was that originally the Kuban region was called Magna Bulgaria whence the Bulgarian tribes were scattered in ca. 650 to the west, and later to the north. Thus, e.g. Paulinus de Venetiis (1320) has the name *Bargara*, which may be connected to Volga Bulgaria and to Kuban Bulgaria as well. The superficial drawing gives us no hint where to place this *Bargara*. The first certain occurrence of Bulgar can be found in the Pizigano map (*Borgar*), then on the Catalan map (*Bargar*), and other later maps.

We know that the capital of Volga Bulgaria was transferred to *Biler* (Russians *Biljarsk*) from *Bulgar* in the middle of the 12th century (Fakhrutdinov 1974, p. 131; Egorov 1985, p. 99). The ruins of Biler were excavated at the village Biljarsk on the river Biljarka. Prior to the Mongol invasion it was the largest town of Volga Bulgaria (Smirnov 1951, p. 229), but in the time of the Golden Horde, though it was also a mint-place like Bolgar, it lost its significance (Fakhrutdinov 1975, pp. 51–52; Egorov 1985, p. 96). The transfer of the capital to Biler was mainly due to the vehement anti-Bulgarian politics of the Russians in the 12th century. Many campaigns were led against the Bulgars, especially by Prince Andrej Bogoljubskoj. The consequence of this aggressive Russian politics was that Volga Bulgaria stretched mainly in the Zakam'e region, and the territories north of the Kama (Predkam'e) were taken and settled by the Bulgars only in the 13th–14th centuries (Smirnov 1951, pp. 44–46; Kalinin 1957, p. 202). Biler was rather far from the Volga where the Russian attacks arrived from. Western cartography reflects this earlier stage of the development of the towns of the Middle Volga region, e.g. the Pizigano map places most Bulgarian towns in the Zakam'e region and along the Kama river. North of the Kama there is practically only one town we know of, the mysterious *Kastrema*. It is noteworthy that even the later maps like the Catalan Atlas and Fra Mauro's world map do not contain any other towns in the Predkam'e region. The appearance of Kazan on the maps is very late, its name crops up only in the 16th century.

One of the several towns placed to the left bank of the river Kama is *Carmanchio* (Pizigano map), *Carma(n)co* (Fra Mauro map). This is nothing else but the Bulgarian town Kremenčuk founded before the Mongol invasion (Smirnov 1951, p. 268). It flourished during the 13th–14th centuries under the suzerainty of the Golden Horde, and became desolate towards the end of the 14th century. The Russians often raided the town in the 14th century. In 1395 the Russians attacked and pillaged Bul-

gar, Žuketau, Kazan and *Kremenčuk* (*PSRL* IV/1, No. 2, p. 380). Then in 1399 one of the most successful Russian campaigns was led against the towns of the Zakam'e region. The above-mentioned towns were captured and pillaged (*PSRL* XXV, pp. 225–226, 229). *Kremenčuk* was on the right bank of the Kama, so placing it on the left bank of the river is a gross error of the Pizigani and Fra Mauro maps.

Another important town of Volga Bulgaria founded well before the Mongolian period was Žuketau or Žukotin in Russian. In addition to Bulgar and Biler, it was one of the most important towns of the region. During the 13th–14th centuries it was a flourishing urban centre of the Golden Horde. The ushkuyniks (*uškujniki*) attacked and sacked Žuketau several times between 1360 and 1391, finally the Russians captured the town in 1395 and 1399. The western maps regularly designate Žuketau as *Sacatim* (Pizigano), *Sacatin* (Catalonian Atlas), etc. The main lesson of these data is that western map makers took this name from Russian informants or from other written Russian sources.

There are numerous intriguing questions concerning the names of towns in the Middle Volga region as represented by western cartographic sources, but here I aimed at pointing to only some of the problems and the intricacy of questions. In sum, I may state that a systematic inspection of West European cartography with a view to the towns of the Middle Volga region seems to be a promising field for researches into the Middle Volga region.

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