

The Travels and Developments of  
the Bulgars in the Seventh to Tenth  
Centuries

Justin Piel

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Professor Mostern

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Bulgaria, the Balkan nation with a Northern boundary of the Danube River, is named after the Bulgars, a group of people that can trace its name back to the Medieval Era. These Bulgars (in many sources “Bulghars”) are a wide ranging people, whose fragmentation led to multiple different Bulgar entities that developed along differing paths through the Seventh to Tenth Centuries and beyond. Of particular focus in this paper will be the collapse of the Bulgar Empire around 670 shortly after the death of Kubrat.<sup>1</sup> The formation of Great Bulgaria,<sup>2</sup> its later collapse, and the perhaps apocryphal story of the travels of the five sons all show the theme of change due to spatial distance and context that would benefit understanding of the Medieval Era greatly. Volga Bulgaria and Danubian Bulgaria have the most historical records, but the other tales that appear can create a fuller picture of the significance of the Bulgars in the wider world’s consciousness. The story of the Bulgars is complicated (as is all history), and deserves more common English recognition than is currently circulating.

The first mention of the Bulgars comes from “Greek author Ioannes Antiochenus in the form of Βούλγαροι” in the 7th century in reference to a proposal to “confederate the Byzantines around 480.”<sup>3</sup> They had slightly different names depending on the script; sources in Latin mention *Bulgari* and some Syriac texts refer to *Burgars*.<sup>4</sup> Bulgars are often also mentioned in conjunction with “Onogundurs,” especially in the context of Khuvrat’s seventh-century empire.<sup>5</sup> These different names could perhaps explain why sources do not have a common consensus on “Bulgar” or “Bulghar.” The confusion on this name in English sources and translations seems to

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<sup>1</sup> András Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, (Budapest: Central Europe University Press, 1999), 219; Khuvrat is also referred to as Kubrat, Khubrat, Kuvrat, and Qubrat. Many names of Bulgar figures around this time follow a similar trend of having many different names depending on the source.

<sup>2</sup> Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 245.

<sup>3</sup> István Zimonyi, *The Origins of the Volga Bulghars* (Szeged: Szeged University Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

vary even in sources of the time. The Cyril Mango and Roger Scott translation of the Byzantine source of the Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor refers to them as “Bulgars” while Ibn Fadlan refers to the Volga “Bulghārs.”<sup>6</sup> In more recent sources on Ibn Fadlan, Joseph Daniel Wilson’s 2014 article uses “Bulghars,” but Jonathan Shepard’s 2022 article uses “Bulgars.”<sup>7</sup> It seems that the two are essentially interchangeable, and the difference is due to cultural factors.

These Bulgars began being mentioned more in the sixth century, but it was mostly in the context of raids on Byzantine lands. Theophanes the Confessor in his Chronicle mentions Bulgars in 501/2, 513/14, 538/9, 596/7 and 597/8.<sup>8</sup> Most of these and other records of the time mostly detail raids done by the Bulgars, which happened enough that “The Byzantine Emperor had the Long Wall built against them in 507.”<sup>9</sup> The Bulgars at this time lived in the “Kuban’ and Eastern Pontic steppe zone,” which covers the area of current-day Hungary to Russia.<sup>10</sup> They were loosely confederated people that lived closely connected to or under the Avars, another group centered on the Carpathian Basin (current-day Hungary).<sup>11</sup> Even with little resources, scholars know that the Bulgars “spoke a form of Turkic as their main language [and] retained many of the customs... of a nomadic peoples of the steppes.”<sup>12</sup>

The incident that led to the first “Great Bulgarian” empire is told only by Byzantine sources, so the accuracy of them is debatable. The sources say that “Khuvrat rose up against the

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<sup>6</sup> Theophanes Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, Translated by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 497; Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulghars*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Daniel Wilson, “Black banner and white nights: The world of Ibn Fadlan,” (Honors College, James Madison University, 2014), 6; Jonathan Shepard, “IBN FADLAN’S REPORT ON THE RUS, GOG AND MAGOG IN LIGHT OF RECENT WORK ON THE MASHHAD MISCELLANY,” *Vostok. Afro-aziatskie obshchestva: Istoriia i sovremennost’* 2022, no. 4 (2022): 67.

<sup>8</sup> Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, 222, 243, 317-18, 399, 401; The years are split this way because the Byzantine calendar’s years began on September 1.

<sup>9</sup> Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulghars*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Golden, *An Introduction*, 244.

<sup>11</sup> Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulghars*, 39-40.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Shepard, “Slavs and Bulgars,” In *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, Volume 2, edited by Rosamond McKitterick, 228-248 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229.

Avar chieftain in 635, and founded an independent empire.”<sup>13</sup> This Khuvrat is somewhat of a Peter Golden quotes John of Nikiu’s Chronicle that states that ““Kubratos, chief of the Huns, the nephew of Organa, who was baptized in the city of Constantinople [in 619] and received into the Christian community in his childhood and had grown up in the imperial palace.”<sup>14</sup> However, no other sources mention this, and in a footnote Golden says that this could be “some other ‘Hunnic’ ruler.”<sup>15</sup> Even if Khuvrat was baptized, Christianity did not stick until much later. A 2020 excavation of a pagan religious complex site dating to the First Bulgarian Empire in the eighth to ninth centuries offers just one of many pieces of evidence that the Bulgars followed a form of paganism to some extent.<sup>16</sup> Khan Boris of the Danubian Bulgars was also baptized and converted to Christianity in 864 or 865, meaning he was not Christian before this.<sup>17</sup> The certainly complicated story is perhaps lost to time, but the general outline is that Khuvrat revolted or warred against the Avars, leading to the formation of Great Bulgaria.

Khuvrat’s gravesite in Mala Pereshchepino, a site in a tributary of the Dnieper River, locates his empire generally in the Dnieper area.<sup>18</sup> His death, placed slightly before 670, and Great Bulgaria’s downfall are the subjects of a widely popular and arguably legendary story. As Theophanes the Confessor recounts, the story is that Khuvrat “died leaving five sons, on whom he enjoined not to depart under any circumstances from their common life that they might prevail in every way and not be enslaved.”<sup>19</sup> One apocryphal tale tells that Khuvrat snapped one stick then failed to snap a bundle, showing the sons the power of unity. However, after Khuvrat’s

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<sup>13</sup> Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 219.

<sup>14</sup> Golden, *An Introduction*, 244-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Maria Cherneva, “A pagan cult center of the first Bulgarian state was discovered around Belogradec,” *BNT News*, Aug. 25, 2020,

<https://bntnews.bg/news/ezicheski-kultov-centar-na-parvata-balgarska-darzhava-razkriha-okolo-belogradec-1070929news.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Shepard, “Slavs and Bulgars,” 239-40.

<sup>18</sup> Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 217-9.

<sup>19</sup> Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, 498.

death the five sons parted, each going on a separate path, with only the eldest, Batbaian, remaining. This led to the area being quickly conquered by the Khazars in 670, and the brothers having to leave their old lands. In truth, the brothers could have separated as a “result of Khazar pressure or [of] internal tensions.”<sup>20</sup> The Khazars’ conquering of the area, as the story goes, resulted in five different groups of Bulgars; one under each brother.

One could question here why prevalence in this essay is allotted to a perhaps unfounded story. In short, the stories and fables of a society give valuable insights to its structure, and fiction often reveals truth that one cannot surmise from other sources. Theophanes writes about the Buglars, mostly focusing on those that crossed the Danube and ended up bordering them. After crossing “the Danapris [Dnieper] and Danastris [Dniester] (rivers that are farther north than the Danube), and, on reaching the Oglos [in the Danube delta], [Asparukh] settled between the former and the latter, since he judged that place to be secure and impregnable.”<sup>21</sup> Whether this Asparukh and the other sons were real or not, they certainly existed in Byzantine consciousness, which gives reason to study it. Even today, the story of the sons exists in Bulgarian consciousness; a quick scroll on the internet provides multiple examples of the legend.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, whatever degree of truth this legend possesses, its permanence in Bulgarian society to this day necessitates a focus upon it.

These Khazars deserve mention as a major power in the Eastern Steppe area. They were a Turkic group that “had become a major political actor after the collapse of another mounted pastoral nomad state, Western Turk Khanate.”<sup>23</sup> Beginning as pastoral nomads, they soon became a large political power, occupying “controlled trade hubs and cities along” important trade

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<sup>20</sup> Golden, *An Introduction*, 245.

<sup>21</sup> Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, 498.

<sup>22</sup> Some various examples are [this Reddit post](#) from 4/17/2023, [this Youtube video](#) from 12/24/2022 and its comments, and [this 1981 movie](#) featuring Asparukh and Kubrat as main characters.

<sup>23</sup> Cihan Şimşek, “Understanding the State Building of Mounted Pastoral Nomads on Sedentation and Mercantile Activity of Khazar Khanate and Volga Bulgars,” (Szeged: University of Szeged, 2022), 124.

routes.<sup>24</sup> The Khazars were one of many “mounted nomadic pastoralists [that] extended their authority over vast swaths of Eurasia.”<sup>25</sup> Groups such as these, and to some extent the early Bulgars, characterized the theme of travel and different modes of subsistence in the Medieval Era. In 652, by defeating invading armies, “The Khazars repulsed the first serious Arab effort to take possession of the northern Caucasus.” meaning their military presence must have been powerful.<sup>26</sup> After Khuvrat’s death, the expanding Khazars “annexed his empire and took possession of the northern territories of the Black Sea.”<sup>27</sup>

Three of the sons of Khuvrat were said to have ended up assimilating into other cultures or generally disappearing within a couple generations. The first, “Baian (*Batbayan* by Theophanes) remained in his land and paid tribute to the Khazars.”<sup>28</sup> Baian, like most of this legend, is controversial because some say he “was a historical person and his people, the Onogurs, were the early Hungarians,” but others make the argument that Baian is “legendary, supposing that his figure was formed after *Baian*, the founder of the Avar Empire.”<sup>29</sup> The other two sons are unnamed in primary sources; these sources just say that “the fourth and fifth went over the... Danube: the former became subject of the Chagan [sic] of the Avars in Avar Pannonia and remained there with his army, whereas the latter reached the Pentapolis, which is near Ravenna, and accepted allegiance to the Christian Empire.”<sup>30</sup> While they are unnamed by Theophanes, “the fifth son was identified with *Alzeco*... [and] the identification of the fourth son [was found to be] *Kuber*.”<sup>31</sup> Of these groups, those who entered the “Ravenna area... preserved

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *A Concise History of the World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 172.

<sup>26</sup> Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 61-2.

<sup>30</sup> Theophanes, *Chronicle*, 498.

<sup>31</sup> Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, 62.

their speech and ethnicity until the late 8th century,” and “Kuber led a revolt against the Avars and ultimately brought his following to the region near Thessalonika.”<sup>32</sup> All three of these groups lose historical prevalence over time and records on them even at the time are murky and sparse. However, they can generally be identified with the Bulgar diaspora after the Khazar invasion. The changes of each group and their subsequent immersions into their surroundings shows the transformative power of the world each of them entered into. By traveling such large distances (or, in Baian’s case, staying in the same area under different rule), these groups entered into circumstances that fundamentally altered their notions of identity as Bulgars.

The Volga Bulgars are perhaps the most controversial group of all the Bulgars. They are generally identified with the descendents of the son Kotragos, who “settled west of the Don,” also remaining under Khazar rule.<sup>33</sup> According to many, this group lived in Khazar lands until the Khazar-Arab wars when, “in 723, the Arabs, attacking from the south, succeeded in breaking through the Khazars... and occupied the former Khazar capital, Samandar and Balanjar.”<sup>34</sup> After the Khazars retreated and moved capitals, the Arabs attacked again under Caliph Marwan in 737, which is most likely the time that “very good relations began to develop between the Bulgars and the Arabs.”<sup>35</sup> Generally it is understood that “the arrival of the Volga Bulgar tribes or some parts of them... could have been the consequence of these wars but the name Bulghar did not appear in the sources [describing the wars].”<sup>36</sup> These groups “crossed the Don-Volga elbow and set off north along the Volga,”<sup>37</sup> with goals of freedom. Here it can be seen how important major rivers were to travel; most travels thus far in the essay have measured their distance or path in reference to rivers. In 750 they settled at the Samara Bend, but due to “Khazar pressure” they

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<sup>32</sup> Golden, *An Introduction*, 245; “Thessalonika” is now Thessaloniki in Greece.

<sup>33</sup> Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 220.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 221.

eventually traveled further north to the Volga-Kama region.<sup>38</sup> Their travels and formation of the Volga Bulgar identity is not widely disputed, but their history under the Khazars is. While most works involving the Volga Bulgars connect them to “Great Bulghar,” Zimonyi argues that since “Khuvrat’s empire was never called *Great Bulghar* as it is an anachronistic name,” the link between Khuvrat and the group that eventually migrated up the Volga is unfounded and not supported by sources of the time.<sup>39</sup> Whether they are descended from Khuvrat and his probable son Kotragos is perhaps unknowable, but this instance teaches that correlation, in this case between the name “Bulgar” in Great Bulgar and Volga Bulgaria does not always equal causation.

The Volga Bulgars’ relationship with Islam is perhaps best revealed by the travels of Ibn Fadlan from the Abbasid Dynasty. in 921-2.<sup>40</sup> Fadlan and others departed from Baghdad towards the Volga Bulgars in order to “instruct [them] in the ways of Islam and to build them a mosque, as well as to deliver funds for the construction of a fortification.”<sup>41</sup> This was at the request of the Yiltwar (King) Almish, who is assumed to be the first Muslim Volga Bulgar ruler, as he told Fadlan “my [Almish’s] father was a heathen.”<sup>42</sup> Although “the alliance between the Bulgars and the Abbasid Caliphate did not materialize,”<sup>43</sup> the Volga Bulgars kept in correspondence with them and remained an important link between European and Asian worlds until its fall to the Mongols.

Lastly, perhaps the most well-known Bulgar group, those that formed what is current-day Bulgaria, also in legend descended from Khuvrat. After crossing the Danube river in either 679 or 680-1, the Bulgars set up “a new empire [the First Bulgarian Empire] settled on present Pliska,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 221-2.

<sup>39</sup> Zimonyi, *Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, “Black Banner,” 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 224.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, “Black Banner,” 10.



in which a large upper Turkic class ruled over the large Slav population.”<sup>44</sup> From here, much of Bulgarian history through the first couple centuries is told in the frame of the Byzantines, especially Theophanes and Nicephorus. This viewpoint bias certainly affected the facts written down and the way the Bulgars’ history was told, possibly still persisting in things historians commonly assume is fact. However, judging as the Bulgars did not keep many historical records for those first centuries, biased sources are certainly better than none. For most of the history of the First Bulgarian Empire, its relationship with the Byzantine Empire oscillated. When Byzantine Emperor Justinian II was “in exile north of the Black Sea [in Khazar territory]” in 705-6, Khan Tervel assisted him in reentry into Constantinople with an army.<sup>45</sup> When Justinian regained the throne, he gave Tervel the title of Caesar, and Tervel commissioned a still-standing “relief carving... high up on a cliff face at Madara” depicting himself “on horseback, trampling down a lion which he has speared.”<sup>46</sup>

However, the relationship between the two Empires deteriorated quickly and intermittent warring characterized their frontier lands. The Bulgars also had periodic battles with their neighbors to the northeast, the Avar Khaganate. After “the khagan submitted to Charlemagne” in 796, “the Bulgars under their new khan, Krum, were quick to exploit the Avars’ predicament,” launching a “devastating raid” in 804.<sup>47</sup> Because of this instability, the Bulgars were able to dramatically expand their empire. During his reign, Krum also captured and killed the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus in 811 and “following nomad custom had his skull made into a drinking cup.”<sup>48</sup> The Bulgars followed old, nomadic customs such as this while also adapting to their changing surroundings and participating in power politics. This is exemplified best in the ruler

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<sup>44</sup> Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 227; Shepard, “Slavs and Bulgars,” 229.

<sup>45</sup> Shepard, “Slavs and Bulgars,” 231.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 233

<sup>48</sup> Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 227.

Boris's conversion to Christianity in 864 or 865 in Constantinople, in which "the name he assumed was that of the emperor, Michael III, who became his godfather."<sup>49</sup> The two large branches of the Bulgars converted to two different religions due to their political and geographical climate; the Volga Bulgars adopted Islam, and the Danubian Bulgars converted to Christianity.

The Bulgars in this period represent a microcosm of many themes of the Medieval Era; trade, power politics, major travels and the consequences of such over time, and pastoral nomadism. A further evaluation beyond the scope of this essay is certainly required in order to fully grasp the economic, social, and environmental conditions for this broad group. Another fault of this essay is little to no focus on the people on the ground; whether there is not many sources for it or if they are just not available online in English is debatable, but the fact remains that this essay covers only the broad evolution of the elite Bulgars. Overall, Old Great Bulgaria and its probable successor states affected and were affected by the areas they traveled to, which compounded over time.

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<sup>49</sup> Shepard, "Slavs and Bulgars," 239.

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