

THE VOLGA BULGARS – Government

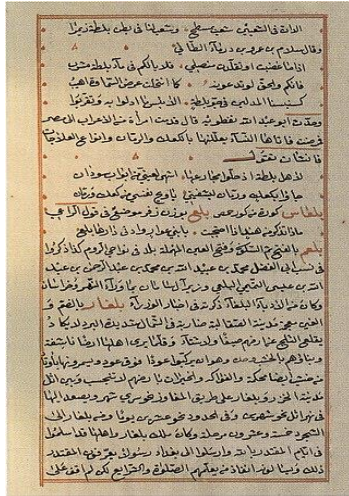
OVERVIEW

Volga Bulgaria was a territory whose borders were not clearly defined. The government of Volga Bulgaria was organized on a federative basis composed of both settled Finno-Ugric peoples, the descendants of the Sarmatians, and other steppe peoples who fled from the Khazars. This newly formed state became subordinate to the Khazar khaganate.

Towards the end of the 9th century, the vassalage of the Volga Bulgars to the Khazars ended and a period of unification and consolidation began. The Volga Bulgar state was a tribal and ethnic union which had struggles for supremacy caused by tribal rivalries. This struggle ended in the 10th century and all tribal leaders and lesser officials became subordinate to the supreme Emir.

GOVERNMENT

Volga Bulgaria was a loosely defined geographical region, and the state of Volga Bulgaria was a confederation of both settled Finno-Ugric peoples, and the descendants of the Sarmatians along with other steppe peoples who had fled from the Khazars and joined it. This newly formed state became subordinate to the Khazar Khaganate.



Ibn Fadlān in his *Mission to the Volga* talked about his experiences during his travel to Volga Bulgaria in 921-922 as part of the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir's diplomatic mission. He stated that Volga Bulgaria was a vassal of the Khazar ruler, and that the Khagan of Bulgaria, his sons, and the other four kings were under Khazar control. However, there was no definite information about the function of these four kings.

The same source mentions that the Volga Bulgar king was compelled to pay a tribute of one sable skin per tent in his realm to the Khazar sovereign. If the Volga Bulgar king failed to deliver this tribute, his son would be held hostage by the Khazar ruler. Ibn Fadlān called him the "King of the Şaqālibah," a term used to refer to the northern peoples.

Ibn Fadlān Mission to the Volga

The victory of the Russian prince Svyatoslav I over the Khazars in 965 ended the Volga Bulgars' vassalage to the Khazar khan.

It was towards the end of the 10th century, the Volga Bulgars established a complete independent and united state. During the period of unification and consolidation, the Bulgar state was a tribal and ethnic union which had struggles for supremacy caused by tribal rivalries.

The Volga Bulgar's state was not homogeneous. The tribal and multiethnic structure of the state made consolidation and centralization difficult. The largest ethnic group was Turkic Bulgars, but there were also Finnic, Ugric, Bashkirs and Eastern Slavic peoples. In addition, there were five tribes: the Bulgars proper, the Suvars, the Esegel, the Bersula, and the Barandzhar.

In the 10th century, there was a constant struggle for supremacy between the Suvar and the Bulgar tribes and this struggle resulted in the appearance of two political centers: Bilār-Bulgar and Suvar. Eventually, the sovereignty of Suvar was eliminated, and the Bulgar lands united around Bilār – Bulgar.

After this, the state showed increasingly feudal characteristics with nobles giving lands in exchange for military service.

Leadership among the Volga Bulgars was held by hereditary emirs, and the ruling class was a military aristocracy made up of a number of families. Governors, known as *tudun*, were responsible for border fortresses.

At the top of the political structure was the first emir, Almysh the son of Shilki, who became the *Yiltawar* or *İltäbär*. This was a title used for the rulers of subject tribal unions. Ibn Fadlan referred to him as the "King of the Saqaliba," a term used in reference to the northern peoples.

Almysh's decision to adopt Islam sped up the process of consolidation and centralization in his lands. Tribal leaders and lesser officials were subject to Almysh, and there were artisans and semi-free peasantry who were controlled by the lesser officials.

Discussions/Questions:

1. How did the Volga Bulgar end their vassalage to the Khazars?
2. How was leadership determined among the Volga Bulgars?

Readings:

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