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# Armies of the Volga Bulgars & Khanate of Kazan

9th–16th Centuries



Viacheslav Shpakovsky & David Nicolle  
Illustrated by Gerry & Sam Embleton

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*Series editor* Martin Windrow

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# ARMIES OF THE VOLGA BULGARS & KHANATE OF KAZAN 9<sup>TH</sup>-16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

## INTRODUCTION

An unarmoured warrior holding a long spear, depicted on a silver bowl made in Volga Bulgar territory and dating from the 10th to 14th centuries. Visible details include the rider's long kaftan-style coat overlapping to the left of the chest, and also the deep, rounded flaps below the saddle – compare with Plate A2. Note also what may perhaps be a bowcase hanging on his left side.



From the 7th to the 8th centuries AD, a newly arrived nomadic people appeared in the Middle Volga region of what is now Russia from the south. The name of these Bulgar tribes was first recorded in Byzantine Greek sources. They came from the steppes immediately north of, and around, the Sea of Azov, and their material culture was closely linked to that of the Alans and Sarmatians who also inhabited this territory. However, the Bulgars, unlike those predecessors, belonged to the Turkic linguistic family, suggesting a powerful Turkic influence upon the peoples who had inhabited this region since the time of the Hunnic migrations during the 2nd to 5th centuries AD.

Under pressure from more recently arrived Khazars at the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th century, the Bulgar tribes separated into two groups. The first moved south-west to the Danube and the Balkan territory of the modern state of Bulgaria, where they were gradually assimilated by the local Slavic population. They soon abandoned their own Turkic tongue to adopt a South Slavic language that evolved into modern Bulgarian; and after a relatively short time, these Balkan Bulgars also adopted the Orthodox Christian faith. Thus was created a substantial state (sometimes known as the First Bulgarian Empire) on the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire.<sup>1</sup>

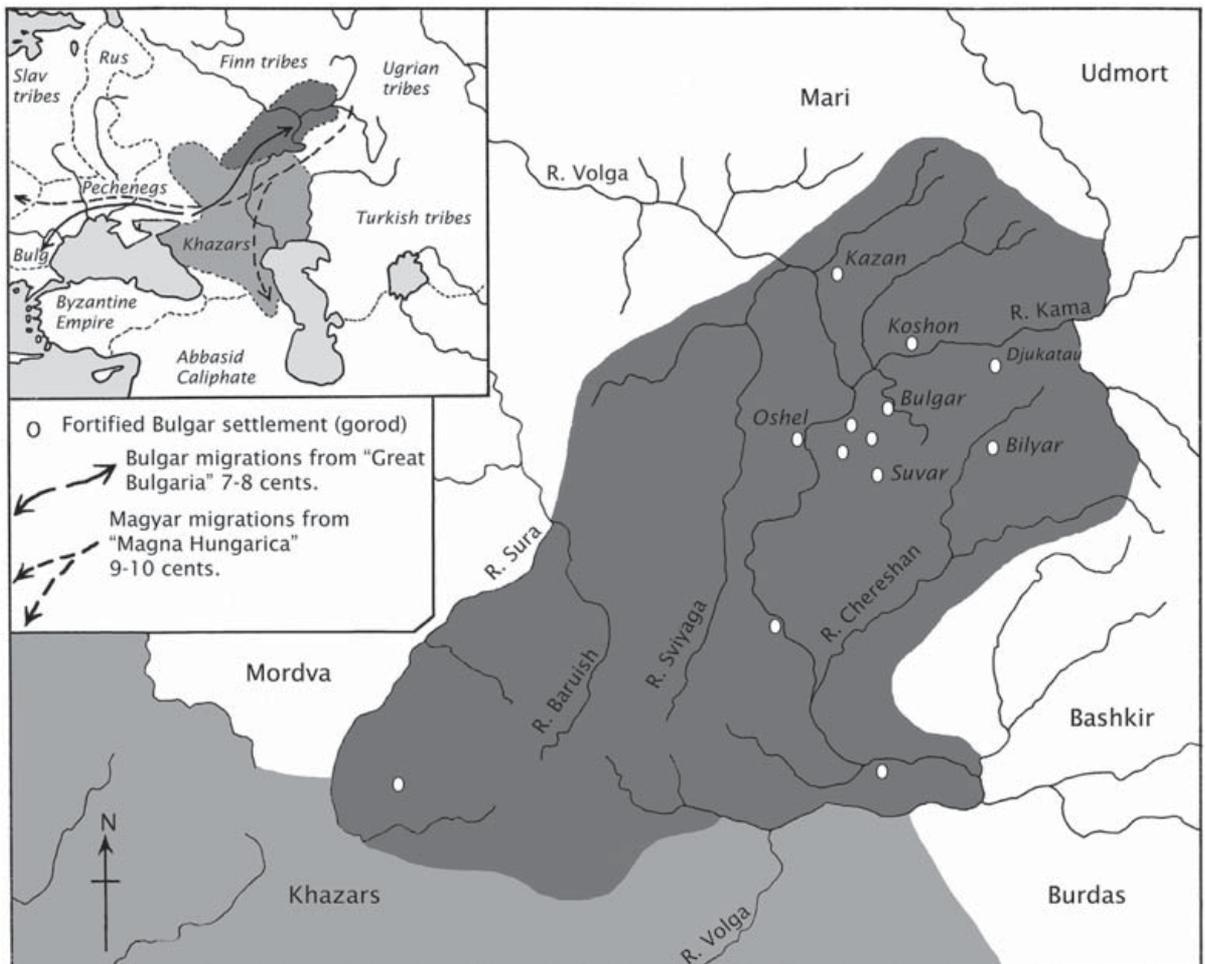
Meanwhile, the second group of Bulgars migrated north, eventually reaching the basins of the Kama and upper Volga rivers, where forests and fertile valleys had been inhabited by Finno-Ugrian and Turkish tribes since at least the 4th century AD. This second group of Bulgar tribes soon created a 'state' (though that term is not really appropriate for the historical period and social conditions), which was itself under the distant suzerainty of the Khazars. It would remain so for some three centuries, until the Khazar Khanate collapsed in AD 965 after defeat by the Kievan Rus' Prince Sviatoslav.<sup>2</sup>

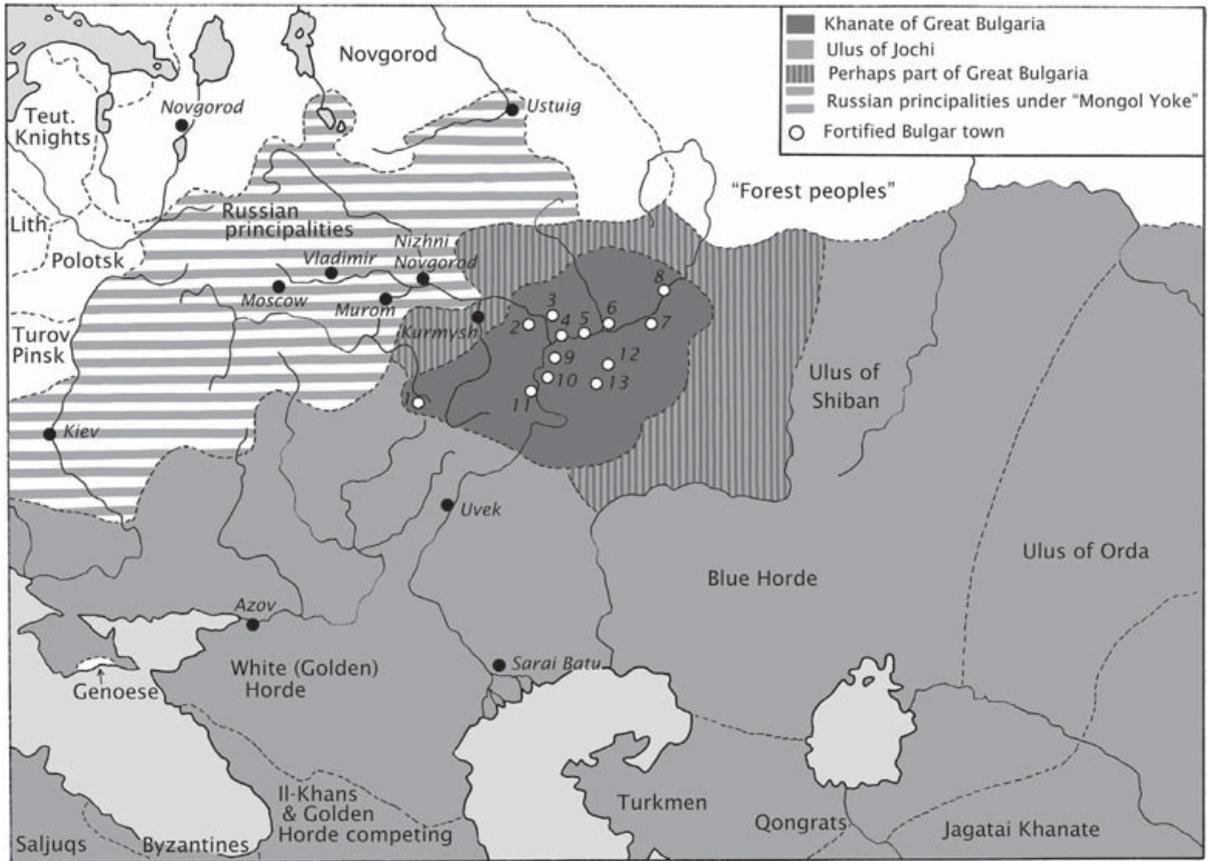
<sup>1</sup> See Osprey Elite 30, *Attila and the Nomad Hordes*, and ELI 187, *Byzantine Imperial Guardsmen 925–1025*  
<sup>2</sup> See Men-at-Arms 333, *Armies of Medieval Russia 750–1250*

Apart from the payment of tribute to the Khazar Khanate, the subordination of the Bulgars was not particularly harsh; they were largely left to conduct their affairs independently, as were most other subordinate peoples of the loosely organized but very extensive Khazar Khanate. This was the situation described in AD 922 by the Arab ambassador and Muslim missionary from Baghdad, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan Ibn al-Abbas Ibn Rashid Ibn Hammad (better known to an indebted posterity simply as Ibn-Fadlan), who visited the Volga Bulgars. His primary mission was to convert them to Islam, and to supervise the construction of their first mosque. However, he also kept some sort of journal, and after his return to the Abbasid capital he wrote about his journey to the lands of the *Ittābār* (vassal ruler) Almish, Yltawar of the Volga Bulgars. Initially Almish ruled over only one part of this people, but, in line with his efforts to unify them and perhaps even to win independence from the Khazars, he asked for recognition from the Abbasid Caliphate in return for embracing Islam. As part of this process he adopted the Muslim name of Ja'far Ibn 'Abdullah.

This initial conversion was somewhat superficial as far as the majority of his people were concerned, but nevertheless they and their descendants remain Muslim to this day. (The Volga Bulgar state would also endure until, having been defeated by Mongol and Russian armies, its survivors

**The Khanate of the Volga Bulgars, 10th–13th centuries, showing the frontiers of c. AD 910.**





were assimilated into the post-Mongol Khanate of Kazan – which in many ways could be seen as a continuation of the Volga Bulgar state.)

Once it was unified, the now extensive Islamic khanate along the upper Volga began to play a vital role in long-distance trade between Western Europe, via Scandinavia, the early state of Kievan Rus' (Russia), and the Islamic world to the south. This brought the Volga Bulgars considerable wealth and a variety of cultural connections, and resulted in their acquiring high-quality arms and armour. Most interestingly, this equipment was imported simultaneously from Western Europe, Central Asia to the east, and the Islamic world to the south (though there was also a significant amount of local production).

During the 10th century the Volga Bulgar Khanate developed an export-based economy that grew and flourished, resulting in the building of significant towns with fine public buildings. Surviving remains suggest that the most impressive of these were either religious, such as mosques, or had strong Islamic cultural associations, such as *hamam* public baths. Many of these new towns were also provided with impressive fortifications, mostly of earth and timber but sometimes with stone towers.

Despite a now well-entrenched Islamic identity, after 1100 some Volga Bulgars began to convert to Christianity. This shift in cultural focus (among some, but not all Bulgars) was reflected in certain military equipment, horse-furniture, and even military tactics – a downgrading of traditional Turkish horse-archery in favour of something akin to Western European cavalry close combat.

**The Khanate of Great Bulgaria as part of the Mongol Ulus Jochi, showing the frontiers of c.1270. Town sites: (1) Muksha, (2) Kirman, (3) Kazan, (4) Koshon, (5) Challi, (6) Kurman, (7) Djukatau, (8) Elabugha, (9) Bulgar, (10) Karabulak, (11) Tetush, (12) Bilyar, and (13) Kakresh.**

After Mongol generals invaded Russia, and defeated the united forces of the Russian princes and their Kipchak Turkish allies at the bloody battle at Kalka River in 1223, they returned homeward via the territory of the Volga Bulgars.<sup>3</sup> This proved to be a significant error. As the Kurdish-Arab historian 'Ali Ibn al-Athir (1160–1233) wrote in his *Al-Kamil fi al-tarikh* or 'Complete History', when the Bulgars learned of the approach of the Mongols they prepared a great ambush, attacking them from the rear and reportedly killing more than 4,000 of them at the battle of the Samara Bend (September 1223). This significant Mongol reverse, little known outside Russia and a few parts of the Islamic world, was seen as a humiliation that Genghis Khan and his commanders neither forgot nor forgave. The Mongols' revenge was a decade in coming, but it resulted in the devastation of the Bulgars' lands and the burning of their towns in 1236. This Mongol ravaging of Volga Bulgaria went on for five years, and saw the slaughter of what some scholars have estimated to be more than 80 per cent of the population.

Nevertheless, in spite of such utter disasters, the surviving urban population gradually returned to their homes, and the Volga Bulgars regained much of their prosperity by the middle of the 14th century. The town called Bulgar, which had been the capital of their khanate during the 10th and 11th centuries, rose to become a particularly important trade centre during the 13th and 14th centuries, when it was widely known as 'The Great Bulgar'. Meanwhile, the city of Bilyar became the political capital and administrative centre of the khanate. Despite this revival in prosperity, however, the political and military situation of the Volga Bulgars remained difficult.

During the 13th century two significant and previously pagan non-Turkish tribes, the Ves' (or Veps) and the Merya, had been converted to Christianity as a result of increasingly close contacts with the Orthodox Christian principalities of Russia. Like so many of the indigenous peoples in the north-eastern part of European Russia, these Ves' and Merya had spoken languages that were part of the broader Finnish family (they are sometimes called Volga Finns or Eastern Finns, though this identification has been questioned). In the same period other peoples, including the Finno-Ugrian Ugra tribes, had cast off the suzerainty of the Volga Bulgar Khanate; similarly, Bulgar control over the Burtas, Votiaks (Udmurts) and Cheremissians (Mari) was weakening year by year.

The original Volga Bulgar state was destroyed during devastating campaigns by two enemies who were at the same time bitterly hostile to each other: the Russian principalities, and the Mongol Khanate of the Golden Horde (generally referred to as the Tatars). Each feared that the Volga Bulgars would become allies of the other. Thus the Tatar khans burned Bulgar city in 1360, 1362 and 1407, while equally damaging Russian campaigns were waged in 1370, 1374, 1376 and 1409. The final collapse of the Volga Bulgars came in 1431, the year that also saw the emergence of the new town of Kazan – which was initially known as 'New Bulgar'. Within a short period this city became the capital of a new or renamed Khanate of Kazan, which survived until 1552. In that year it finally fell to a Russian army commanded by Grand Prince Ivan IV 'the Terrible' of Moscow, Tsar of all the Russias.

3 See Osprey Campaign 98, *Kalka River 1223*



Two riders, one on a mythical winged lion, depicted on a golden ewer forming part of the Nagyszentmiklos Treasure. It was found in Hungary, but may have been of Khazar, Bulgar or early Magyar origin. The horseman wears a long mail hauberk and some type of vambraces; the archer on the winged lion seems to be clad from wrists to knees in 'soft armour'. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. VII.B33, Vienna)

## CHRONOLOGY

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| 7th–mid-8th centuries | Bulgar tribes migrate from the Northern Caucasus to the basin of the Svijaga river, a tributary of the Volga.   |
| Mid-9th century       | A Bulgar army under the leadership of Khan Adar crosses the Volga and defeats the Magyars, obliging them to migrate to the region between the rivers Don and Dnieper.                                     |
| 922                   | Embassy from Abbasid Caliphate to Volga Bulgars, led by Ibn-Fadlan; Yiltawar Almish accepts conversion of his realm to Islam.   |
| 945                   | Treaty agreed between Prince Igor of the Kievan Rus' and Emperor Constantine VII of Byzantium to form an alliance against the 'Black Bulgars'.  |
| 965                   | Kievan Rus' army devastates the Khazar capital of Itil' and raids as far as the Islamic frontier; winning access to the Black Sea, they attack the Volga Bulgars to gain control of eastern trade routes. |
| 980                   | Bulgar campaign against the Rus'.   |
| 985                   | The first Rus' campaign specifically directed against Volga Bulgaria; Rus' Prince Vladimir agrees a treaty of peace between the Rus' and Bulgars that would not be violated for 100 years.                |
| 988                   | Prince Vladimir converts to Orthodox Christianity, obliging the Rus' to do the same.  |
| 990                   | Prince Vladimir of Kiev sends the Byzantine scholar Mark the Macedonian to the Volga Bulgars to spread Christianity; four Bulgar princes convert, and resettle in Kievan territory.                       |
| 1006                  | A trade treaty between the Volga Bulgars and the Rus' is mentioned in the chronicles.   |
| 1024                  | Serious famine ('the great hunger') in the Russian Principality of Suzdal'; Russian chronicles state that many Russians travel to Volga Bulgaria to buy bread.  |
| 1088                  | Volga Bulgars attack the town of Murom, capital of a Russian principality of the same name.   |
| 1107                  | Volga Bulgars attack the town of Suzdal', capital of  |

A model of the late medieval town of Mari, with its typical wooden fortifications. For centuries the Finnish Mari people lived between Volga Bulgar and Russian territory, but they were eventually converted to Orthodox Christianity. (T. Elseev, National Historical Museum of the Mari Autonomous Republic, Yoshkar-Ola; photo V. Shpakovsky)



- a Russian principality of the same name.
- 1120** Russian Prince Jurii Dolgoruky ('Long Arms') attacks the Volga Bulgars, accompanied by the *druzhinas* (princely armies) of Suzdal' and Rostov.
- 1135, 1145 & 1155** The Arab travellers or geographers Abu Hamid al-Garnati from Andalusia, and Abu Mansur Mawhub al-Jawaliqi from Iraq, visit the Volga Bulgar Khanate and subsequently write descriptions.
- 1152** Volga Bulgar campaign against Russian Principality of Yaroslavl'.
- 1164** Prince Andrey Bogolubsky ('the God-Loving') of Vladimir and his brother Yaropolk invade Volga Bulgar territory.
- 1171** Unsuccessful campaign by Prince Andrey Bogolubsky against Volga Bulgars.
- 1174** Prince Andrey is assassinated by courtiers conspiring with his second wife, a Volga Bulgar woman seeking revenge for Andrey's persecution of her people.
- 1183** Rus' attack Volga Bulgars, Kipchaks and Mordvians.
- 1186** Rus' attack Volga Bulgars.
- 1209** Volga Bulgars devastate the lands of the Russian Principality of Ryazan.
- 1218** Russian Principality of Suzdal' attacks the Volga Bulgars.
- 1217 & 1219** Volga Bulgars seize Unza and Ustug. The armies of the three Russian principalities commanded by the brother of Prince Sveatoslav Vsevolodovich of Novgorod burn the Bulgar town of Oshel'.
- 1220** Major campaign against Volga Bulgaria by Sveatoslav Vsevolodovich of Novgorod.
- 1221** Foundation of Nizhniy Novgorod on the site of the destroyed Bulgar town of Oshel'; a six-year armistice is agreed between the Volga Bulgars and Russian principalities.
- 1223** A substantial Mongol army is ambushed and badly mauled on the Samara river in Volga Bulgar territory.
- 1229** Mongols attack Volga Bulgars and Kipchaks of the western steppes. Major famine in north-eastern Rus' territory is alleviated when a Bulgar amir sends Prince Yuri Vsevolodovich 30 large river ships loaded with wheat.

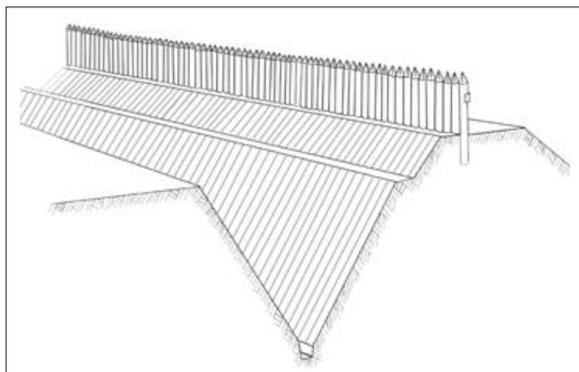
- 1236** A Mongol army destroys Volga Bulgar towns and cities; the territory of Volga Bulgaria is incorporated into the Mongol *ulus* (princely territory) founded by Genghis Khan's eldest son Jochi and currently ruled by his son Batu; nevertheless, Bulgar resistance continues for 40 years thereafter.
- 1242** The town of Bulgar becomes the capital of Khan Batu's *ulus*.
- c.1250–c.1350** The rise of the restored Volga Bulgar Khanate as a part of the wider Mongol Golden Horde.
- 1276** First mention of the town of Kazan in Russian chronicles, on the occasion when Khan Mengu-Timur gives 'the Bulgarian and Kazan lands' to his son-in-law, Prince Feodor Rostislavich Cherni of Yaroslavl'.
- 1360** *Ushkuyniki* river-pirates from Novgorod burn the Volga Bulgar town of Jokotin on the Kama river.
- 1361** Khan Bulak Timur (Tughluq Temur) seizes the city of Bulgar.
- 1366, 1369, 1370, 1374 & 1375** Repeated raiding by Russian *ushkuyniki* against Volga Bulgar territory of the Khanate of Kazan.
- 1376** Volga Bulgars pay 3,000 gold *rubles* to the Grand Prince of Russia, plus an additional 2,000 to the Russian *voevodas* (barons) and their warriors, to protect their towns from 'robbery'. Also, first recorded use of firearms by Volga Bulgars against the Russians.
- 1391–95** The army of Tamerlane (Timur-i Lang) invades Volga Bulgar territory.<sup>4</sup>
- 1392** Further raids by river-pirates against the towns of Jokotin and Kazan.
- 1407** Amir Edigei, founder of the Noghay Horde to the south, invades Volga Bulgar territory.
- 1409** Last mention of *ushkuyniki* river-pirates as a significant threat to the Volga Bulgars.
- 1431** Prince Vasily II Vasilyevich 'the Blind' of Muscovy sends an army under Prince Feodor Pestry to invade Volga Bulgar territory, crushing the Bulgar forces and devastating the town of Bulgar.
- 1467–69** Major war between the Russians and the Khanate of Kazan.
- 1547 & 1550** Two unsuccessful attempts by Grand Prince Ivan 'the Terrible' of Muscovy to conquer Kazan.
- 1552** Tsar Ivan finally defeats and devastates Kazan, ending the extended history of the old Volga Bulgar Khanate.

**Tsar Ivan the Terrible portrayed as St George, defeating Idegäy (Yadigar) Muhammad Ibn Kasim, the last Khan of Kazan, in 1552. This image is from a 17th-century Russian-printed *History of Kazan*.**



<sup>4</sup> See MAA 222, *The Age of Tamerlane*

# WARS OF THE VOLGA BULGARS



The moat and timber wall of the fortified town of Bulgar in the 10th century. Note the timber facing on the front of the rampart, presumably not only to stabilize the earth but also to make it difficult to climb? The ledge two-thirds of the way up would encourage attackers to pause within easy weapon range of the palisade. (A.S. Sheps, after A. Gubidylin)

## The pre-Islamic period

No unadulterated Volga Bulgar records have survived; most available information comes from contemporary Arabic, Persian, Indian or Russian sources, but archaeological excavations provide useful additional evidence.

It is believed that the territory which became Volga Bulgaria had previously been settled by Finno-Ugrian peoples, including the Mari. Bulgars then moved northwards from the Azov region around AD 660, settling what became their territory during the 8th century, and almost certainly establishing themselves as the dominant population by the close

of the 9th century. During this process the Bulgars united various other tribes or peoples of differing origins who lived within this region.

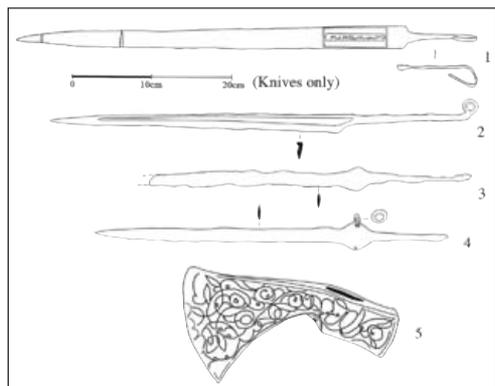
Most scholars agree that the Volga Bulgars were initially subject to the Khazar empire, until the latter's conquest in the later 10th century by Prince Sveatoslav, ruler of the Kievan Rus'. Gradually freed from Khazar domination, this early and still fragmented 'Volga Bulgaria' grew in size, wealth and power. By then an almost entirely unrecorded process of unification was already under way, having started at some time during the late 9th century. The capital of this emerging state was meanwhile established at a location that was called the city of Bulgar, approximately 160km (100 miles) south of the modern city of Kazan. Nevertheless, most scholars doubt that this state of Volga Bulgaria could have truly asserted its independence from the Khazars until the latter were defeated by the Rus' in AD 965.

## 10th–13th centuries: Islam and its rewards

Islam was adopted as the state religion during the early 10th century as the result of an embassy led by Ibn-Fadlan, who was sent by the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir in AD 922–23. This conversion resulted in the establishment of relations with the distant empire of the Abbasid Caliphate, the despatch of teachers of Islamic law to Volga Bulgaria, and the building of a fortress and a mosque. Subsequently the Volga Bulgars themselves attempted to convert the pagan Rus' Prince Vladimir 'the

Great' of Kiev to Islam. According to the chronicler Nestor's account, in AD 987 Vladimir called together exponents of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths. Judaism was rejected for a variety of largely political reasons: it had been the official faith of Kiev's main enemies, the Khazars, and the Jews' ancient loss of Jerusalem was also interpreted as a sign of God's anger towards them. Islam was similarly rejected by Vladimir, because it would have required the Russians to give up wine; the Prince of Kiev reportedly declared that 'Drinking is the joy of all Rus' – we cannot exist without that pleasure'. So Eastern Christianity was selected as the future faith of the Russians, leading to an alliance with the mighty Byzantine Empire.

(1) to (4): Daggers of the 10th and 11th centuries.  
(5): Volga Bulgar cavalryman's decorated battleaxe.  
(A.S. Sheps, after I. Izmailov)



Prince Vladimir the Great also seized what seemed to be an opportunity to conquer the Volga Bulgars and force them to pay him a tribute. However, according to the chronicles one of his commanders showed Vladimir captives dressed in leather footwear, proclaiming that such people would prove to be bad tributaries, and that it would be wiser to look for people who wore *bast* shoes made of birch-bark. If there is any truth in this story, it probably reflected the fact that the soft-leather boots characteristic of the Bulgars and other Turkic peoples were the mark of horse-riding warriors, whereas footwear made of birch-bark was typical of peasants and farmers.

The original Volga Bulgar Khanate thrived as a centre of agriculture as well as handicraft production. By dominating the middle course of the Volga river it controlled much of the trade between Europe, the eastern Islamic world, Central and even Further Asia prior to the Crusades. Its capital of Bulgar developed into a thriving city, rivalling in size and prosperity some great urban centres of the medieval Islamic world. The Volga Bulgars' trading partners included Vikings from Scandinavia, the Yugra (Ugrian) and Nenets peoples of the far north-eastern corner of Europe and north-western Siberia, as well as the great international cities of Baghdad and Constantinople, and merchants were attracted from as far away as Western Europe and China.

Other significant cities or trading towns within the khanate included Bilyar, Suvar (Suwar), Qaşan (Kashan) and Cükätaw (Jokotin), while the modern cities of Kazan and Yelabuga were founded as Volga Bulgar border fortresses. Some other cities mentioned in medieval Russian texts remain unidentified, including Tuxçin (Tukhchin) and İbrahim (Bryakhimov). Most were probably so ruined during the 13th-century Mongol invasion that they were abandoned and forgotten.



These two weapon finds embody two distinct influences upon the military equipment used in the Volga Bulgar Khanate. (1) Sword, early 11th century; probably of Russian origin, this was found in the territory of the Mordvin – today, Mordovian – people, south-west of the heartland of the khanate. (2) Sabre, 14th century; probably of Turco-Mongol steppe origin, this too comes from Mordvin territory. (Mordovian Republic United Museum of Regional Studies, Saransk, Russian Federation)

The importance of the town of Bulgar (Bulghar, Bolgar) in the 11th century is confirmed by its inclusion – here outlined in a white square, rather vaguely located somewhere north of the Caspian Sea – on a stylized map of the Turks and their neighbours that appeared in the *Diwan Lughat al-Turk* manuscript written by Mahmud al-Kashgari in 1076. (Ms. Ali Emiri, Arabi no. 4189 ff.22–23, Millet Genel Kütüphanesi, Istanbul)



Russian principalities to the west of the Volga Bulgar Khanate posed a significant threat, and during the 11th century the country was devastated by a series of Russian raids. In the late 12th and early 13th centuries the Principality of Vladimir-Suzdal' took the offensive as a means of defending its own eastern borders. Most notable in this regard were Princes Andrey 'the God-Loving' and Vsevolod III, whose armies systematically pillaged Bulgar cities to such a degree that, under this pressure from the west, the Bulgars felt obliged to move their capital from Bulgar to Bilyar.

During the period of their maximum power the Volga Bulgars controlled a substantial territory estimated at around 86,000 square kilometres (33,200 square miles). However, during its first few centuries of existence this Volga Bulgar state remained an island of Islamic territory, cut off from the rest of the early medieval Muslim world by the lands of various pagan or Christian peoples. It was also so far north that several of the daily prayers required of all pious Muslims had to be squeezed into a very short period during the brief daylight hours of a northern winter.

### 13th century: the coming of the Mongols

In 1223, after defeating an alliance of Russian and Kipchak armies at the battle of the Kalka River, a Mongol army commanded by Subotai and Jebe headed northwards into the territory of the Volga Bulgars. At that point in history Genghis Khan's troops were widely believed to be invincible; nevertheless, to the astonishment of most chroniclers, in late 1223 or 1224 the Bulgars ambushed and defeated Subotai, Jebe and their Mongol army. It would seem that the army led by the Volga Bulgar *Ittäbär* or king Ghabdulla Chelbir fought alongside the armies of two Mordvian tribal *Inäzors* or princes named Puresh and Purgaz. This combined force attacked the Mongol vanguard as they rode alongside a significant bend in the course of the Samara river – hence the clash came to be known as 'the battle of the Samara Bend'. The anti-Mongol Khwarizmi historian al-Nasawi claimed that only 4,000 Mongols survived the battle, but this is unlikely, bearing in mind that the same army under Subotai and Jebe remained strong enough to subdue a Kipchak tribe on its way back to Mongolia. A more restrained account by the Middle Eastern historian Ibn al-Athir merely stated that the Mongols were ambushed in the Volga region, and that after several hard-fought skirmishes with the Bulgars the Mongols tired and moved back down river.

Arrowheads from the Zolotarevskoe fortified settlement, dating from the Mongol siege of 1237. All are Tatar Mongol except for a Russian four-sided crossbow bolt-head – bottom, fourth from left. (State Historical Museum, Penza; photo V. Shpakovsy)





**The Koromyslova Tower of the *kremlin* or citadel of Nizhny Novgorod. Founded in 1221 on the site of the Mordvin and Bulgar town of Oshel', burned down in a Novgorod attack, it later passed to Muscovy. The present *kremlin* is one of the oldest brick fortresses in Russia, constructed early in the 16th century as a base from which to attack the Khanate of Kazan. (Photo V. Shpakovsky)**

Despite facing a hugely dangerous common foe in the Mongols, the Russian princes persisted in attacking Volga Bulgar territory – presumably because the Bulgars were seen as a traditional rival, whereas the Mongols were as yet an unexpected eruption from a distant quarter, who might never return. The Russian princes also wanted to establish their supremacy in an economically important region to control its considerable sources of revenue. In the event, the Mongols reappeared in 1229 under the command of Kukday and Bubedey, who had been sent with a considerable force by the Great *Khagan* or supreme Mongol ruler, Ogedei. This force defeated what might be described as Bulgar ‘frontier guards’ at the Ural river and began the occupation of its upper valley in the southern Ural Mountains.

Three years later, in 1232, Mongol cavalry subjugated the south-eastern part of the territory of the Turkic Bashkir people, and occupied southern areas of the Volga Bulgar Khanate itself. However, the Mongols once again failed to capture the Bulgars’ main towns and cities. Consequently, at a Great *Kurultai* or gathering in the Mongol capital of Karakorum, it was decided to transfer the best Mongol generals from campaigning in China and the Middle East to lead a major effort to subdue the Volga Bulgar Khanate.

With reportedly more than 300,000 troops, presumably including an effective siege train, Batu Khan struck in 1236. This time the Mongols aimed at the Bulgars’ cities; Bilyar, Bulgar, Suvar, Cükätaw, and virtually all the other fortified places fell one after another, their inhabitants being either massacred or sold into slavery. When it was all over, the remains of the Volga Bulgar state became part of the *Ulus* or principality of Genghis Khan’s son Jochi, which later became known as the Golden Horde. Bulgar territory was further divided between separate ‘duchies’ that subsequently emerged as vassals of the Golden Horde, though with some degree of local autonomy.