

The Origins of the Bulgars

Dilian Gurov

1. Introduction

In AC 680 a chieftain by the name of Asparukh crossed the Danube with his people and founded a new state south of the river. The state was - and still is - called *Bulgaria*. Who were the people (or peoples) he lead, and what were their origins? This document is an attempt by a non-historian to address the issue in an economic yet systematic fashion.

Motivation The main problem in addressing the above question derives from the scarcity of the available information. As a result, a multitude of theories have been proposed and fiercely defended by various writers, sometimes driven or influenced by other motives than purely scientific ones. To make things worse, many authors have not cleanly separated in their texts the indisputable *facts* from what are *interpretations* of these facts. This makes it rather difficult for the historically interested reader to form an objective opinion on the matter.

At present, the main theories about the origins of the Bulgars are: (1) *Turkic* origins, (2) *Sarmatian* origins, and (3) mixed, Turkic-Sarmatian origins. Many other theories have been put forward in the past, but have subsequently been shown unsupportable.

Challenges When attempting to address the posed problem, the main challenge stems from the usual difficulties in dealing with the history of the so-called *Pax Nomadica*, the world of *nomadic peoples* of the Eurasian steppes. Typical for these peoples is the constant *flux* of languages, gene pool, material culture, religious practices, etc., as the result of migration and trade with other (usually more advanced, sedentary) civilizations, but also as the result of change of the leading clan. Furthermore, historians have to face an extreme scarcity of artifacts and virtually non-existing own documents of these peoples due to their nomadic lifestyle, and often also due to a lack of writing.

Another challenge comes from the difficulty to relate names from narrative sources written in different languages; for example, in some written languages only the consonants were written.

Characteristics To address the question of the origins of a people, one has first to decide on what *characteristics* define a people in general. Candidate characteristics are:

- *Ethnonym*: the name by which a people is referred to and refers to itself, distinguishing itself from other peoples.
- *Anthropological type*: such as mongoloid, europeid, etc.
- *Language and writing*: such as Turkic and Iranian languages, runic scripts etc.
- *Way of life*: often classified as nomadic, semi-nomadic and sedentary.

- *Material culture*: the way of production; artifacts like pottery, jewelry and weapons.
- *Society*: the political and military organization of the people.
- *Religion*: religious beliefs and practices, burial practices.

Sources To analyze these characteristics, the historian has to rely on data obtained from various *sources*. These can be classified as:

- *Narrative sources*: documentary evidence such as histories, geographies, letters.
- *Archaeological sources*: material remains from settlements and burial sites.
- *Legacy sources*: present-day remnants, for example in language, gene pool, or (religious) traditions.

The main task of the historian investigating the origins of a people is to *relate* these kinds of evidence, in particular the events and the names of individuals, peoples and geographical names from the narrative sources to the available archaeological data. Another task is to *trace* (backwards in time) the various characteristics that are found typical of that people and its society.

2. Geographical and Historical Context

The *geographical region* we are concerned with here are the Eurasian steppes, and more specifically the region to the north of the Caucasus mountains, east of the Black Sea (old name Pontus Euxinus) and the Sea of Azov (Meotida), and west of the Caspian Sea. The main rivers of the region are the Don (Tanais), Volga (Atel) and Kuban (Kuphis). The main heights are the Ergeni Hills (Hippian Mountains) in northern present-day Kalmykia.

It is this region where, from the 4th century AD on, the Bulgars are mentioned in early mediaeval documents, and where in the first half of the 7th century *Old Great Bulgaria* existed, the precursor of Danubian Bulgaria and the Volga Bolgar state.

Until the second half of the 4-th century AD, Pax Nomadica has mainly been populated by Iranian speaking peoples. After that, the described region has been the scene of a series of invasions by (presumably) Turkic speaking tribes: Huns, Turks, Avars, Khazars.

3. Documentary Evidence

There are practically no early mediaeval Bulgar written documents. The main narrative sources for early, “pre-Danubian” Bulgar history come from Armenian, Gothic, Byzantine, Syrian, Arab and Khazar documents such as histories and geographies.

An extremely important document is the so called *Nominalia*, or “Namelist of Bulgarian Rulers”.

Also very important is the reply of Pope Nicholas I to a letter sent in 866 by the Bulgarian ruler Boris I inquiring on the conditions for the Bulgar state to accept Christianity from Rome (instead of from Constantinople). The letter indirectly informs about the rituals and habits of the Bulgars.

4. Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological evidence on early Bulgar history comes mainly from burial sites and settlements. The main material artifacts found are *pottery, jewelry and weapons*.

The burial sites reveal *inhumation* in pit graves with northern and western orientation, and are characterized by a *scarcity of artifacts*. Another notable element is the presence of *artificially deformed skulls*.

5. Characteristics of the Bulgars

Here we discuss the various characteristics listed in the Introduction, and attempt to trace these backwards in time as far as possible.

Ethnonym The origin of the Bulgar ethnonym is unclear. One popular version is that it derives from the Turkic word *bulgha*, “to mix”, suggesting that Bulgar means “mixed people”. Another theory, among many others, relates the ethnonym with the city name of Balkh in Bactria. The earliest mentioning of the ethnonym in the documentary sources dates from the 4th century AD.

Further, a number of other tribal names have been associated with that of the Bulgars. For example, some mediaeval documents mention that Asparukh led a people named “v.n.n.tr” (in Khazar sources) or “Unogundur” (in Byzantine sources) away from the Hippian Mountains, as the result of Khazar expansion in the second half of the 7th century. This ethnonym has been related by historians to the names “Venender”, “Vhndur” and “Onogur” occurring in other texts. Also, the tribes of the Utigurs and Kutrigurs, appearing in some narrative sources referring to the 6th century, are associated by many historians with the Bulgars.

The use of the Bulgar ethnonym in the names of Old Great Bulgaria, Danubian Bulgaria and Volga Bolgar possibly indicates the power of the Bulgars in the military-tribal unions of the time, similarly to the use of the ethnonym of the Huns. However, one has to keep in mind that, in Pax Nomadica, an ethnonym could derive from a *politonym* as the result of the change of the leading clan. The same holds true of the language and the religion of these peoples.

The Bulgar ethnonym cannot be traced back to the time before the 4th century in any definite fashion. Some historians suggest that it can be identified with the ethnonym “pu-ku” mentioned in different Chinese sources from the 2nd century AD onwards, but for now this theory has to be considered hypothetical.

Anthropological type The anthropological data obtained from burial sites suggest that the Bulgars have predominantly been “*brachycephalic europeids* with slight mongoloid admixtures”. In contrast, the Turkic speaking peoples are believed to have been (stronger) mongoloid.

Language and writing The language spoken by the Bulgars is also unclear. There are many remnants of Bulgar words in present-day Bulgarian, an otherwise Slavonic language. The Nominalia provides further Bulgar words of (presumably) animals and numbers, and so do some documents in the Bulgar language written in the Greek alphabet (see below). These words have been classified differently by various historians. The names of the Bulgar rulers form yet another source. For example, the name of Asparukh is suggested to derive from *aspa*, meaning horse in Old Iranian.

The earliest Bulgar written documents date from the 8th century AD. Inscriptions exist both in Greek and Bulgar using the Greek alphabet. There are also some inscriptions in a *runic script*, not yet convincingly deciphered. The script shows similarities with other runic scripts of Central Asia, such as Turkic (Orkhon) and Pamirian runic scripts.

Tracing back the Bulgar language thus seems to lead us to Central Asia. It is likely, however, that the Bulgar population has been *multi-lingual*, speaking Iranian as well as Turkic languages.

Way of life Initially, the Bulgars are believed to have led a semi-nomadic way of life. They lived in tents called *jurts* and semi-dugouts and lived on breeding horses and fishing. The Bulgars gradually began to settle down, possibly as a result of trade and contact with settled peoples, and as a result of forced migration to areas less suitable for nomadic life.

The Nominalia reveals the use of a 12-year *cyclic calendar*. Cyclic calendars were more typical of nomadic societies, whereas the sedentary civilizations preferred to use linear time.

Material Culture The *pottery* of Danubian Bulgaria exhibits elements of the 4th century Chernyahov Culture which occupied a large region, encompassing the steppe and the forest-steppe zone from the left bank of Dnepr to the Lower Danube, and the later 6th/7th century Penkovka Culture which occupied the forest-steppe zone, from the left tributaries of Dnepr to the river of Seret in the west.

Society As with all nomads of the steppes, the society of the Bulgars has been based on families and clans, forming a *military-tribal union*. The peoples of Pax Nomadica have usually been led by a so-called "charismatic" clan, often determining the name and language of the tribal union. According to the Nominalia, the clan *Dulo* has been the main charismatic clan of the Bulgars.

The title of the Bulgar rulers is traditionally given as "khan" or "khagan", which is believed to be of Turkic origin, but the earliest explicit use of this title (in a Byzantine document) only dates from 822. Another title - "kanasybigi" - appears in some sources; its origin however is disputed.

Religion and religious practices The religion of the Bulgars is also unclear. One popular theory is that it has been Turkic *Tengrianism*. What is known for certain is that *shamanism* and worshipping the sky and the heavenly bodies has been typical of the peoples of the Eurasian steppes, and that the *horse* and the *dog* have had an almost holy status.

Burial through *inhumation* distinguishes the Bulgars from many other peoples which have used cremation, such as many Turkic speaking peoples and the Iranian speaking Alans and Slavs. The northern or western *orientation* of the graves has been considered by many archaeologists as characteristic of the Bulgars. The *scarcity of artifacts* in the graves has been interpreted differently by various historians; while some view it as an indication of low social status of the inhumated, other authors prefer to interpret it as an indication of a belief, that the deceased will have everything they need in the afterlife. Some of the burial practices - like breaking or tying up the legs of the corpse, additional locking of the grave with stones, or putting the corpse in a side niche - seem to suggest a fear that the souls of the dead may come out of the grave and harm the living. *Artificial skull deformation* has been characteristic for various Iranian speaking nomadic peoples, most notably the Sarmatians. Certain similarities can be seen with burial sites attributed to the Skyths in Central Asia as early as in the 3rd century BC, and with later necropolises in the same area, for instance the Babashov necropolis, located on the right bank of Amu Darya, not far from the Bishkek valley, which existed from the end of the 2nd century BC until the beginning of the first century AD.

6. Conclusion

The above analysis does not allow for a conclusive answer of the posed problem of the origins of the Bulgars. Most of the discussed characteristics can be found in nomadic peoples of both Iranian and Turkic speaking origin. The Bulgars are thus likely to have been a mixed, multi-lingual people, as suggested by the 3rd theory mentioned in the Introduction. Whether the ruling clan has been Turkic speaking while a considerable part of the population Iranian speaking, or vice versa, cannot be verified at present.

From the 4th until the 7th centuries the most likely place of residence of the Bulgars must have been the region north of the Caucasus (and the Black Sea) described above. As to the time before that, the question becomes much fuzzier, due to the flux of characteristics typical for the peoples in Pax Nomadica. When going back in time so many centuries, it seems more meaningful to try to trace back individual *characteristics* rather than whole peoples. Such an attempt would possibly lead us to Central Asia, in the vicinity of the Pamir and Hindukush mountains. In particular, some language features, the runic script, and especially the burial practices point in this direction.