

Russian-Volga Bulgarian Mutual Relations in the Sphere of Spiritual Culture

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Abstract

The significance of the problem under study is caused by the fact that spiritual culture of Volga Bulgaria and Kievan Russia despite significant differences conditioned by special characteristics of the ethnic group, religion, policy and economy had much in common, which was due to similar environmental and social-economic conditions of development; direct mutual influence, increased trade relations and style of the epoch, etc. Cultures of Ancient Russia (Ancient Rus') and Volga Bulgaria are in the first instance cultures of Middle Ages. Despite significant differences in cultures of peoples of that epoch, existing on big territories neutralizing forces made culture of one feudalistic country similar to another one's. It was caused by similar development conditions, direct mutual influence, broad trading links and style of the epoch. The present paper aims at finding and analyzing facts of interaction between spiritual cultures of Russia and Volga Bulgaria. In this paper we will turn our attention to certain elements of this big, many-sided, multi aspect issue – spiritual bonds. The leading method of the present research is comparative-historical analysis, whose basis for our study is pursuance of massiveness, representativeness of the used content; and of its specificity in terms of time, space and ethnicity. The main results of the study are finding facts of Russian-Volga Bulgarian mutual relations in the metric system, architectural mathematics, geographical knowledge, oral folk arts, in religious sphere, and etc., as well as finding origins, conditions, and tools of mutual relations in different spheres of spiritual culture.

Keywords: Volga Bulgaria, Kievan Russia (Kievan Rus'), "Babylon", story, Islam, Christianity, Paganism

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Volga Bulgaria and Kievan Russia were almost neighboring formations, which emerged simultaneously. Being in Eastern Europe, they were surrounded by peoples with similar ethno cultural features. These states had a lot in common in social-economic and cultural relations. Volga Bulgaria had been the so-called Russian Gates to the East; and Kievan Russia – Bulgarian Gates to the West. Strictly regulated, well-trodden Bulgarian-Kievan route joined the two countries and peoples culturally as well. Caravans from both countries didn't only bring different goods, but also ideas, skills, and cultural achievements. Trading-economic, political cooperation turned into cultural-ideological links. But this complicated world of relations in the sphere of spiritual culture has not been purposefully studied yet.

1.2 Discussion and Status of a Problem

Despite differences in religion, culture, traditions, political systems, and etc., Russia and Volga Bulgaria established close ties in the first days of their existence. Religious differences were not an ethnicities dividing barrier between these two countries.

As many facts show, differences in faith were not a barrier for Bulgarian-Ancient Russian cultural relations. Their mutual influence can be seen in many aspects: peoples' knowledge in metrology, construction mathematics, geographical conceptions, oral folk arts and other spheres of spiritual culture. For instance, it was considered natural to invite a Bulgarian craftsman to Russia to build a Christian church, or when an Ancient Russian craftsman lived in Bolgar, the capital city, close to the Cathedral Mosque, where an ancient Russian official seal was found. (Janin, 1979). Christian colony functioned in Volga Bulgaria.

The theme of relations between ancient Russia and Volga Bulgaria is traditional for historical science.

Archeologists and historians studied military campaigns, treaties of peace, trading links of both countries. Researchers and collectors in the XIX century, such as, S.M. Shpilevskii (1877) and many others. I.I.Sreznevskii found church ancientries of Bulgarian state period. Thus, he made a conclusion that, since Bulgarian period “Russian people started to come to mid Volga region” (Sreznevskii, 1884).

In the Soviet period, B.D. Grekov published an article “Volga Bulgaria in IX-X centuries”. He pointed out that Bulgaria held key positions in trade with the East in mid Volga region (Grekov, 1945). The leading researcher of Bulgaria A.P. Smirnov in his article “Russian element in the culture of Volga Bolgars” pointed out that Russia had a stronger influence on Bulgarian culture, than Byzantium, Caucasus, and China did. Mainly, this influence could be seen in Jeweler’s art (Smirnov, 1948).

In 1986, 1992, research paper collections “Volga Bulgaria and Russia” and “The route from Bolgar to Kiev” were published, which dealt with many aspects of Russian-Bulgarian mutual relations. In particular, they described the workhouse of Russian amber craftsman, which was situated close to the Main Mosque of Bolgar, the capital city; they also considered certain observations of mutual relations in spiritual culture. The serious research was M.D. Polubojarinova’s monograph “Russia and Volga Bulgaria in the X-XV centuries”, where certain artefacts of spiritual culture are described among other archeological findings.

Thus, research of Russian-Volga Bulgarian relations has two centuries history. But cultural relations and mutual influence has not yet become a study subject. The predecessors, mainly archeologists, turned their attention to description of certain artefacts, defining in the first place their ethno cultural belonging.

The concept “spiritual culture” includes many different forms of social consciousness: art and morals, law and politics, ideology and religion, education, science and literature, manners and curves, folklore, mythology, language, etc. At the same time, spiritual culture is not just a sum of these or other forms of social consciousness. That is why the research of mutual influence of Russian and Volga Bulgarian worlds of spirit in all aspects requires efforts of many specialists, not only historians.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Written Sources

While working on the paper we found and made use of various sources: written, archeological, ethnographical, folkloric, linguistic, and other sources. Written sources are mainly works of Arabian-Persian authors, ancient Russian and Tatar sources. But a significant amount of these sources on the subject of interest is fragmentary; it contains a restricted amount of information which is often contradictory.

2.2 Archeological Sources

Important, and sometimes the only sources are archeological findings, which make it possible not only to get more specific information, fixed in written sources, but also to newly reveal one are another phenomenon of spiritual culture in mutual influence with other ethnicities and cultures. The use of archeological findings as a source of history of spiritual culture and ethnic cultural mutual influence is based on the understanding of culture as means and result of material and spiritual activities of people, their dialectic entity, which makes all objects and phenomena connected with human activities a potential source of information.

2.3 Traditional Ethnography Data and Oral Folk Arts

Ethnography data are of significant importance for our research. They show that owing to people’s memory, vestiges of preceding epochs are kept in one or another form (more often transformed). Ethnographical material of Russian, Tatar, and other peoples, which are at our disposal, show that amazing ethnographical parallels existed.

It is known that specific and very interesting source for historical interpretation is folklore. In folklore, one can see fanciful reflection of life and culture, social-economic, political views of peoples, who created it, and their mutual cultural influence.

2.4 Linguistic Sources

Quite often linguistic sources were used. Etymological and semantic analysis of Russian, Tatar, and other languages historical terms, relating to spiritual culture and their loans lead to interesting conclusions.

2.5 Research Methods

The following methods of analysis were mainly used in the study of the given sources of information: comparative-historical, stadial-retrospective, historical-contrastive, typological, analytical, and other methods of analysis.

Complex research of various sources makes it possible to find answers to many of the questions raised in the study. At the same time, the use of integral method is not only the possibility to apply to various information sources in one study, but also it is the principle of mutual consistency check and correlation of facts and objectivity of the results.

3. Results

3.1 People's Knowledge: Metrology

Trading-economic links led to formation of similar features in metrology. Temporal-space units of measurement were used to measure long distances. They were usually determined by ways of movement (on foot, on horse, by ship, etc). And their sizes were almost the same. The main linear measure for measuring the distance of the trading route from Bolgar to Kiev, and other trading routes was distance covered on foot in one day; usually it was 45-50 kilometers. In the East, this unit of measurement was called *manzil'*. Quite similar were Bulgarian and Russian small units of length. Usually they were determined by sizes of body parts of medium height men. The same units of length can be found in Kievan Russia and Volga Bulgaria (*lokot'-kolach* (elbow), *shag-adym* (step), etc.) with the difference between them less than a centimeter. Despite apparent variety even in one unit of measurement, ancient Russian and Bulgarian measurement units were very similar to Eastern, mostly Central Asian measures. The measurement system of peoples of Central Asia was based on two number division: units of length were consistently divided by 2, 4, 8. In this regard, they were different from Ancient Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Western European measurement systems. In the pre-Mongolian period Bulgars had a unit of length *arshin* (official *lokot'* (elbow)), which was in our calculations about 75 centimeters. Arshin, which was brought to Russian measurement system in XIV century from Bolgar-Kazan region, was shortened and in 1674 it was 71, 8 centimeters. It was done with the aim to comply with Russian measurement system, which existed at that time. Arshin was 1/3 of *sazhen'* (Russian fathom – 215, 4 centimeters).

3.2 "Babylons"

Unique "drawings" – inscribed rectangles (the so-called "Babylons") are worth mentioning. They can be found in materials of Ancient Russia and Volga Bulgaria. Lines and parts of lines were in many correlations, on the basis of which it was possible to make different calculations, geometrical constructions. Parts of "babylon" reflected linear measures system, used in construction in the period under review. In reliance on geometric conjunction of "babylon" lines in architecture, it was possible to achieve symmetry, proportions, harmony, and symbolic lines in architectural complexes; while popular metric system was used in practical geometry (Rybakov, 1957).

Geography of "babylons" outspread is interesting. According to published information, such patterns are fixed in bricks in Sarkel IX century (6 pieces), in the clay slab (IX century), roof tile (mid X century), stone flag and amphora (XI century) from Taman' ancient settlement; one each (XII-XIII centuries) in materials from Kuznetsovo village near Bezhetsk; from the settlement near Izborsk (the latter ones are both in ancient Tver'); from Tutaevo village (Upper Volga region); from Vschizhsk ancient settlement (Rybakov, 1949). In the Danube Bulgaria, the above mentioned pattern is found on the tombstone of Bulgarian nobleman Mostich (mid X century). One square "babylon" is made out of used stones in Pliska (late VII – IX centuries). In the capitals of first Bulgarian tsardom Pliska, Preslav and in Madara village (IX century) temples, palaces and other buildings are rectangular and square in plan. Their sizes fully comply with "babylons" characteristics. Pliska fortifications are also similar to rectangular "babylon" (Aladzhev, 1980). In our opinion, fortifications in Bilyar were also constructed considering "babylons".

Geography and chronology of the mentioned "babylons" shows that the first of them were known during first Bulgarian tsardom on the Danube, and in Sarkel, Khazar kaganate. It is in these two places where the bigger part of "babylons" was found. Patterns, dating back to XI century were found on archeological monuments, which were originally linked to khazar-bulgars. In our opinion, the original source of "babylons" in ancient Russia and Volga Bulgaria was Khazar-Bulgarian world.

3.3 Geographical Knowledge and Legends

Russian-Bulgarian relations can be found in the sphere of geographical knowledge. Close trading-economic links, and later cultural, political ties between Volga Bulgaria and Kievan Russia started to be established quite early. Kievan Russia was known in the East through Volga Bulgaria, and Volga Bulgaria was known in the West through ancient Russia, especially before a new trading artery from Bolgar to Baltics appeared. So, both states made a certain contribution to the development of geographical knowledge of the time. Bulgars, for instance, better than others knew their own territory – the area of the so-called "seventh climate" and everything that was

located to the north, west, and east of it. It can be said that information about various peoples and lands of the North, to a considerable extent of Russia, Urals, and western Siberia found in Muslim geographical literature of X-XIII centuries is mainly Bulgarian information. The information about states of the North (Darkness), peoples of Volga region, Ural mountains and even Arctic ocean was obtained in Bulgaria by Ibn-Fadlan (X century), al-Garnati (XII century), Ibn Batutta (XIV century), Ibn an-Nugman (XIII century). Ibn an-Nugman from Khwarezm wrote that in Bolgar he heard about Russia and Yugra (Poljak, 1964).

Amazing combination of economic, practical and spiritual can be found in oriental beliefs and legends of northern peoples. Until XII century Bulgars held key positions in trade with northern peoples, where eastern merchants were not allowed. With this aim, rumors were spread about many troubles expecting visitors to northern lands, or about troubles, which could be brought by northern peoples to southern lands. Thus, famous legends of the Russ of Arsa, where they allegedly killed outlanders appeared (Novosel'cev, 1965).

Legends of northern peoples were spread in ancient Russia as well, where merchants were very interested in trade links with the North. These legends in many aspects are similar to Bulgarian legends. In Bulgarian legends, as well as in Russian ones, northern peoples were depicted as savage tribes, who were locked up by Alexander the Great behind the stone mountain, and trying to escape; these and other legends said that they sold animals' skins and fur; and Bulgarian and Russian merchants brought them swords and iron; Bulgarian and Russian merchants did not know their language, the first ones thought them mute, the latter ones had a speechless trade with them, etc. (Tatischev, 1962; Puteshestvie... 1971).

Influence of Muslim geography, based on theory of climates can be seen here. The fourth climate, where main Muslim centers were located, was in the same distance from too hot and too cold countries, combining this way the best conditions for people's activities. The farther the climate was from average, the farther from civilization was its population; and peoples living out of these seven climates were considered barbarians and savages (Bartol'd, 1966). These geographical conceptions worked in favour of Bulgarian as well as Russian merchants. They added horrendous, more concrete stories to these conceptions.

Let's turn our attention to one more folkloric story. Some popular stories and themes of Bulgarian and ancient Russian folklore with the change of historic conditions were altered and sometimes acquired social-political meaning. "Fanciful images originally reflecting only mysterious forces of nature, now acquire social attribute too and become historical forces" (Engel's, 1961).

For instance, we can mention the story of a Serpent, or a Dragon living in water (lake, river) and demanding an offering – a young girl. This story, according to folklorists, appeared in ancient times and many peoples had it, including Turkic and Slavic peoples (Propp, 1946). The fact that Bulgarians and ancient Russians had such stories is confirmed by written sources.

In folklore of peoples of Middle Volga region, Tatars in particular, this story is one of the most popular. Usually the story is the following: a dragon lives somewhere in the lake, not far from the capital and every year he demands an offering – the tsar's daughter. The day of the offering turns into a day of a countrywide grief (Vasil'ev, 1924).

Standoff with Khazar kaganate was one more fact that brought Volga Bulgaria and Kievan Russia together. In this regard, it is interesting to compare this abovementioned common fairy story with historic reality of IX-X centuries. As it is known, Volga Bulgaria was subordinated to Khazar kaganate and paid tribute to it until the latter was defeated by Prince Svjatoslav. The Kagan constantly devastated and forayed Bulgarian lands. In addition to that, the tsar's daughter had to become Kagan's hetaera, and his son had to be kept a hostage. Ibn-Fadlan's works describe this in detail.

One more circumstance, the location of Khazar capital and Kagan's palace should be mentioned. Itil', the capital, was situated in the estuary of Volga River and consisted of three parts. The part, where Kagan lived was located on the island; there was a bridge to one of the river banks from it (Zakhoder, 1962). The connotation is a dragon living in the water.

There are other themes similar to this folkloric story. Tatar legend "Aibika" (a girl's name) is worth mentioning. It tells a story of a bad thief Churakaj, who lived on one of the islands in the estuary of Volga River, and abducted a daughter of a bey of Alabuga city (Elabuga; there is an ancient Bulgarian settlement "Devil's ancient settlement"). A brave dzhigit (skillful horseman) defeated Churakaj and returned a daughter to her father. In the abovementioned example toponymical, geographical and historical data fit into a system.

Hatred to Khazar kaganate reflected in legends has a historical background. That is why it is not accidental that Khazar kaganate is called The Land of Dragon in Tatar legends. (Tatar khalyk tabyshmaklary, 1970).

The villain in Ukrainian and Russian myths and legends is also a Serpent who flies from the south (“Black Sea Serpent”) and demands girls as offerings. A fiery serpent in ancient times represented warlike Cimmerians (Rybakov, 1981). Bulgarian-Kievan relations can be seen in other folkloric stories and aspects of culture (for instance, cosmogonic views, writing system, etc.).

3.4 Religion

Relations of the two young states in the sphere of religion are worth mentioning too. It is not accidental that chronographers paid much attention to the subject.

Official conversion to Islam in Volga Bulgaria happened much earlier than adoption of Christianity. Despite this, there was much in common between the two states on their way to monotheistic religion. Social-economic requirements appear almost simultaneously. Young feudal states needed a relevant religion, ideology. One of the success factors for spreading Islam in Volga Bulgaria was pagan monotheism inherited from their ancient Turkic ancestors. This factor significantly facilitated the spread of new religion among Bolgars. That is why the replacement of one pagan god - Tengri with Muslim god - Allah was not painful. The same was the situation in Ancient Russia. Procopius of Caesaria wrote about the Russ ancestors that “they (Slavins and Antes) consider that there is only one God creator, God of lightning is the Lord above everyone”. But further shift to monotheistic religion in Ancient Russia was aggravated by violence, individual acts. Namely, Prince Vladimir’s reforms of the year 980. The head of the pantheon was God of Thunder, lightning, military achievements, who was similar to Bulgarian Tengri – Perun. One of Perun’s primary functions is military function. In our view, the statement of Bulgarian tsar Almush to hit the insubordinate Sabirs (Kovalevskij, 1956) with a sword is pagan in character.

The reform of the year 980 pursued a goal to prolong the life of paganism to some extent. But it also set the stage for Christianity.

Which faith to accept? How? Where from? These questions were far from idle inquiries for Volga Bulgaria and Ancient Russia. Adopting Christianity from Greek Church created a threat of becoming vassals of Byzantium for Kievan Russia. The situation became relaxed after Vladimir’s marriage. Volga Bulgaria adopted Islam from the Samanid Empire, not from main Muslim religious center. Late address of Bulgarian tsar to Caliphate pursued material and political goals. The Caliphate was not capable of encroaching on Volga Bulgarian sovereignty at that time.

The 985-986 years Treaty between Volga Bulgaria and Kievan Russia is an agreement of two powerful neighbors. Both states were aware of the importance of their neighbor’s choice of faith. In a year after the agreement of the year 985 was concluded, authoritative ambassadors, who were aware of Vladimir’s choice of religion arrived in Kiev. The Bolgars propagated Islam with competence, taking into account Vladimir’s weaknesses as well. “Vladimir listened to them; he himself liked such pleasures of life as, concupiscence and glutton. But he did not like genital mutilation and refusal of pork and alcohol...” (Polnoe sobranie russkih letopisej, 1962). So, Islam was rejected. But Prince Vladimir’s further actions show that Bulgarian ambassadors’ efforts were not in vain. Vladimir sent ambassadors to Bolgar. “Go to Bolgar, learn about their faith, try it”, he says (16 Polnoe sobranie russkih letopisej, v.2, 1962, p.71). But these actions were not successful. In a year, Kievan Russia was baptized, officially adopted Greek Orthodox Christianity. But bolgars did not give up their idea of spreading Islam in the neighboring state for a long time. Soon after official adoption of Christianity in 990, Vladimir sent Philosopher Marcus the Macedonian to Bolgar, who soon returned to Kiev. The mission of massive propaganda of Christianity had a certain amount of success. Four Bulgarian Princes arrived in Kiev and adopted Christianity (Polnoe sobranie russkih letopisej, 1962). But despite certain success, both states kept to their faiths. Bulgaria was Muslim, Kievan Russia – Christian. There is much in common between the future of Paganism and Monotheism. Islam and Christianity since the first days started fighting against Pagan Cults, expressing damnation and anger towards them. But, despite consistent fight against Pagan Cults, monotheistic religions did not manage to eradicate Paganism completely, even after a thousand years of fight. Its vestiges existed up to the recent past. Russian Christians in the XIX century left a handful of wheat heads in the field as an offering to Ancient Slavic God Volos. This is quite understandable. Paganism, centuries old traditions, reflecting forces of nature, crusted habits of life and household, ancient and family collectivism were very close for Bulgarians and Russians. This way, Paganism merged together with monotheistic religion. Elijah became the so-called Christian twin of Perun, there is much in common between Mother of God, faith of Christian Parasceva and Pagan Mokosh. The name of main pagan god of Bolgars Tengri merged together with the name of Muslim Allah. Tengri became the synonym of Allah. His name, Tengri, is found on Bulgarian Muslim tombstones, and his symbols in form of schematic pictures of the sun decorate those stones.

A Bulgarian citizen and a Russian one, who adopted new religion, Islam and Christianity relatively, could practice their faiths and keep pagan rites at the same time. Throughout the pre-Mongol period Kievan Russia and Volga Bulgaria both had dual faiths. But the leading role belonged to Christian culture in Kievan Russia, Islam and Islamic culture in Volga Bulgaria.

One of important and similar factors for both states was the fact that Islam, as well as Christianity were adopted from culturally developed states. For Kievan Russia, Christianity opened the door to many centuries Culture of Byzantium or Rome, heiress of ancient Greece. Islam joined together highly developed oriental states with ancient traditions. Consequently, Islamic East states enjoyed period of Revival, Muslim Renaissance. With the adoption of monotheistic religions, cultural achievements of those states were brought too; ideological basis was created for joining together highly developed countries. In both states with the spread of religion, there was a spread of culture, education, and literacy.

Some authors consider religion a deterrent in relations between the states under study. But, as we can see from many facts, differences in faiths were not a serious barrier for Bulgarian-Russian mutual relations. That was the manifestation of tolerance, peculiar to both of the states in that period.

4. Conclusion

In the present article we mainly turned our attention to famous facts, which are not hard to plumb. Further research in the sphere will result in revealing underlying links between cultures of the two peoples and countries. The period under review is the history and culture of two young, independent states, which due to their "youth" were sensitive to achievements of all cultures surrounding them. During this period, there is still much in common, new, not conservative, and human in these two cultures. These two developed civilizations certainly needed each other.

5. Recommendation

Paper materials can be used for complex, systematic study of spiritual culture of Russia and Volga Bulgaria. It can better describe peaceful relationships between these two neighboring countries and peoples.

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