

Volga Bulgar and Khazar Examples for the State Building Traditions of Medieval Mounted Pastoral Nomads in Scope of the Sedentariness and Commerce

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1. Introduction

Like every human community, the mounted pastoral nomads had social organization but this social organization is still subject of debate. Still obscure and complicated social organization of mounted pastoral nomads could be observed as early as 10th century B.C. in the steppe region which had various names throughout the ages and is currently called 'Eurasian steppes' by many scholars. These first mounted pastoral nomads were known as 'Scythians' (Sakhas) in the anglicized form based on a name that was given by their contemporary Greek neighbors.

From Scythians to late early modern age, this mounted pastoral nomadism was biased as a dormant social organization form. This stereotype similarized these people when they had reached their peak in power at early and high medieval ages with the examples of Huns and Mongols or in their so-called decline in late medieval or early modern ages as in the examples of post-Golden Horde or post-Shaybanid khanates. According to this stereotype, there is mobility and flexibility in physical movement but not in social and economic forms and conditions. So the conclusion "poor nomads are pure nomads" had been reached by various scholars.

I will raise some other questions on this social organization based on sedentariness, mercantile economic activity, and their effects in the state-building. Our focus will be on two mounted pastoral nomadic societies of early medieval age; Khazars and Volga Bulgars.

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The Khazar Khanate and Volga Bulgaria were commercial, mercantile states. But these two states were also mounted pastoral nomad societies and they adapted to stationary life besides continuing mounted pastoral nomadism. Contrary to the classical pure nomad stereotypes and classical theories with a similar approach, an active mercantile life was present in various mounted pastoral nomad societies. These rich and intense mercantile practices had an influence on their state-building.

The traditional east-west “Silk Road” was supplemented with the northern routes under the Western Turk Khanate and its successor state, the Khazar Khanate. The Kama silver items from Byzantine, Sassanian empires, and Central Asia reflects the first steps in the formation of the northern route, which is also called “Fur Road”. Approximately during 800 A.D, the silver dirhams started to flow from the central Muslim mints to Eastern Europe from Khazaria to Scandinavia. It is called also “Silver Road”. This silver stream attracted the Varangians or “Rus” to Eastern Europe.

From the 10th century onwards, the dirhams of the Samanid dynasty in Transoxania reached Eastern Europe. In the 10th century, the Volga Bulgars became the main intermediaries of the northern trade. Between the decline and fall of the Khazar Khanate and the formation of the Mongol Empire, the most important center of trade in Eastern Europe was Volga Bulgaria connecting eastern Eurasia and the Islamic world with Kievan Rus, Scandinavia and the peoples of the far north.

2. Khazar Khanate and Volga Bulgar Examples

2.1. Historical Background

Khazar Khanate had become a major political actor after the collapse of another mounted pastoral nomad state, Western Turk Khanate. Geographically, their center of power was at more western regions compared to its predecessor. Byzantine chronicler Theophanes had described Khazars as East Turks.¹ While the word in Byzantine chronicles ‘Turkoi’ referred to

¹ Harry Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes, An English Translation of Anni Mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813), with Introduction and Notes*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) 22.

Western Turk Khanate,² later during the 9th century, the term Turks was mainly used for Khazars.³

Armenian chroniclers pointed out the history of Khazars much earlier and mentioned Khazars in events dating to late 2nd century to 4th century A.D. Armenian chroniclers who had mentioned Khazars in these early times were born long after these dates and this early records by those chroniclers might fall into the category of anachronism.⁴

The political vacuum is quite common in histories of mounted steppe nomads and it had occurred after the fall of Turk Khanate in the west. Khazars filled this political area as probably not legal but nominal successors. Unlike many other posts Turk Khanates, Turkic people, and societies in their era, they had claimed the political state title Khanate. Their center of power, like their predecessors, was on the continental trade roads and they controlled trade hubs and cities along the way.

Oghur (or Uighur) people who spoke Turkic language, came from the steppe which forms modern Kazakhstan and then moved to the west of Urals around 460 A.D.⁵ They fell under the hegemony of Sabirs but later around the beginning of the 7th century A.D. under Bulgar leadership, Oghurs regained their independence from Sabirs.⁶ Byzantine sources tell us that the leader of Bulgars Khuvrat rose against Avar chieftain and found the Bulgar Empire.⁷ But not long after his death, his empire collapsed and one part of his people migrated east to settle near the Don River at the lands of Khazars after 670 and lived under the subjugation of Khazars. After the Khazars were defeated by Umayyad commander, and later caliph, Marwanin 737, these events probably triggered the development of diplomatic relations between Bulgars and the Islamic caliphate.⁸

² András Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: An Introduction to Early Hungarian History*, Translated by Nicholas Bodoczky (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999) 281.

Mihail Illarionovič Artamonov, *Hazar Tarihi, Türkler, Yahudiler, Ruslar (History of Khazars, Turks, Jews and Rus)*, 155.

³ Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 282.

⁴ Artamonov, *Hazar Tarihi, Türkler, Yahudiler, Ruslar (History of Khazars, Turks, Jews and Rus)*, trans. Ahsen Batur. 3rd Edition, (Istanbul: Selenge, 2008). 157.

⁵ Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 212.

⁶ Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 215.

⁷ Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 219.

⁸ Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe*, 220.

2.2. Mercantile Activity and Sedentariness

At the beginning of the 9th century, Islamic dirhams reached to Russia through Khazar Khanate, and Khazars played an important role in the development of Islamic trade.⁹ Islamic merchants had become active in Khazar capital Itil (Idil) and reached lower Volga.¹⁰ After the fall of Umayyads in 749, the Islamic caliphate ceased expansionist activities against Khazars, and replacement of Umayyads by Abbasids rendered the expansion of trade possible.¹¹ But for the 9th century, only two Islamic sources give information about Rus-Khazar-Islamic world trade: Ibn Khordadbeh and Ibn al-Faqih.¹² We learned that Rus' merchants used Khazar lands to reach Islamic trade centers in various ways.¹³ According to one of those Islamic sources, *Kitāb al-Masālik w'al-Mamālik*, Ibn Khordadbeh describes this 9th-century trade activity as follows:

If Rus' follows river Danus, they visit Hamlic (Hanbalig), the city of Khazars. The ruler of the city takes tax from them. From there they reach Khazar Sea. They visit realms around this sea... Sometimes they load their trade goods on camels from Gorgan and come to Baghdad. Slav servants (slaves) help them as translators. They say that they are Christians and pay jizya...¹⁴

But especially after the 10th century, Islamic sources give significant data about this trade activity. Khazar trade became so widespread that even goods like silk dresses and mirrors from China had been found in Khazar-era cemeteries.¹⁵ The Khazars in this era acted as middlemen. When possible, they collected tributes and tithes in coins instead of goods. The tribute which they collected from Rus princes in 956-964 according to the Primary Chronicle is an example

⁹ Noonan, "What Does Historical Numismatics Suggest About the History of Khazaria in the Ninth Century?," *Archivium Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 3 (1983): 266.

¹⁰ Noonan, "Khazaria as an Intermediary Between Islam and Eastern Europe in the Second Half of the Ninth Century: The Numismatic Perspective," *Archivium Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 5 (1987, 1985): 179.

¹¹ Zhivkov, *Khazaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 147.

¹² Noonan, "Khazaria as an Intermediary", 180.

¹³ Noonan, "Khazaria as an Intermediary", 180

Peter Golden, *Khazar Studies, An Historico-Philological Inquiry into the Origins of the Khazars*, Vol. 1. (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1980), 107.

¹⁴ Ramazan Şeşen, *İslam Coğrafyacılarına Göre Türkler ve Türk Ülkeleri (Turks and Turkic States According to Islam Geographers)*, (Ankara: Türk Kültürü Araştırma Enstitüsü Yayınları, 1985), 184.

¹⁵ K. Alan Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 2nd Edition, (Rowman/Littlefield, 2006), 79.

of this practice.¹⁶ Khazars might even have minted their own coins.¹⁷ The hoards of coins from Khazar and Volga Bulgar era spread through Baltics, Rus' and Scandinavia.

Noonan even had asked the question "How was this wealth used?"¹⁸ He gave the answer within his own articles, as he highlighted this monetary accumulation as part of Khazar and possibly Volga Bulgar mounted pastoral nomads mercantile and sedentary state formation.

Al-Mas'udi mentioned seven thousand well-armed and paid Muslim soldiers in Khagan's army.¹⁹ According to him, these Muslims had come to Khazaria from Kharezm due to war and plague in their homeland. Noonan called these soldiers standing mercenary troops²⁰ but considering their status and social rights which were mentioned by Al-Mas'udi, these soldiers were more household troops than mercenaries. Ibn Rustah and Gardīzī added an interesting detail to the Khazar: some soldiers of Khagan's strong army composed of 10 thousand cavalymen were supplied by the wealthy.²¹

The above mentioned specification does not fit to the description of the traditional concept of mounted pastoral nomad army. The traditional concept for mounted pastoral nomad military structure is based on clansmen and their kinship that have formed a mounted army. But this description of Khazar army which was supplied by the wealthy, fits either to the feudal military structure or late medieval household military concepts. We may reach more precise conclusion after having information about these wealthy people. But still we can say military structure of Khazars as a mounted pastoral nomadic army contradicts with traditional concept.

¹⁶ Noonan, "What Does Historical Numismatics Suggest?", 279.

S.H. Cross and O. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle Laurentian Text*, (Cambridge, 1953) 84.

¹⁷ Roman Kovalev, "What Does Historical Numismatics Suggest About The Monetary History of Khazaria in the Ninth Century? - Question Revisited," *Archivium Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 13 (2004): 129.

¹⁸ Noonan, "What Does Historical Numismatics Suggest?", 281.

¹⁹ Şeşen, *İslam Coğrafyacılarına Göre Türkler ve Türk Ülkeleri (Turks and Turkic States According to Islam Geographers)*, 46.

²⁰ Noonan, "What Does Historical Numismatics Suggest?", 269.

²¹ Şeşen, *İslam Coğrafyacılarına Göre Türkler ve Türk Ülkeleri (Turks and Turkic States According to Islam Geographers)*, 36, 82.

Al-Balkhi tradition made a similar but inferior description. Istakhri's description of the Khazar army is twelve thousand soldiers without constant payment. Also, he added that the soldiers only received small amounts of money in long intervals and unlike Ibn Rustah or Gardīzī, there is no mention of the skill and bravery of these soldiers.²²

The description of the city of İtil (Idil) according to Istakhri has similarities with other Islamic sources like *Hudud al-Alem* in which there is a short but detailed description of the city. The city was divided by a river, in the west, the ruler who called Tarkhan Khagan lived in a walled town with all of his troops and on the other side, Muslims and pagans lived under governors each of them from a different creed.²³ Istakhri also described the city as a walled town and divided into two sections by the river, one section was for foreigners, merchants and common folks like Muslims and the other was for the ruler and his entourage. He also added that only the ruler got the right to have brick buildings while the rest of the population, including ten thousand Muslims had either felt-tents or mud buildings. The city had no villages, and fields were sparse. He used an enigmatic phrase, pure Khazars, while describing the ruler of Khazars residing at the western side with soldiers.²⁴

According to both traditions, the descriptions of İtil (Idil) city tell us that city had a more structured and complex social organization. The ruler and 'pure' Khazarians which shows many features of the medieval feudal nobility. The city administration and legal systems were described as multi-cultural which is quite reasonable when considering the trade hub feature of the city.

While the central city had this complexity, the lack of rural settlements and sparse agricultural fields present evidence for mounted pastoral nomadism with its all social flexibility, as some scholars call 'semi-nomad' or 'transhumance' was the dominant social form.

²² Şeşen, *İslam Coğrafyacılarına Göre Türkler ve Türk Ülkeleri (Turks and Turkic States According to Islam Geographers)*, 156.

²³ V.F. Minorsky, *Hudud Al-alam The Regions of the World A Persian Geography*, (Cambridge University Press, 1982) 161–62.

²⁴ D.M. Dunlop, *The History of The Jewish Khazars*, 91–92; Şeşen, *İslam Coğrafyacılarına Göre Türkler ve Türk Ülkeleri (Turks and Turkic States According to Islam Geographers)*, 156.

3. Conclusion

Although being primarily depicted as mounted pastoral nomad societies, the Khazar Khanate and Volga Bulgaria were also highly efficient commercial and mercantile states. They adapted to sedentary life along with mounted pastoral nomadism. Contrary to the stereotypes which hypothesize that these states were “pure nomads” and classical theories which employ a similar approach, an active mercantile life was present in various mounted pastoral nomad societies. This was evident in the city formation considering their trade and tributary practices and money printing, which all attest to their rich and intense mercantile practices and state-building.

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