

AVARS, BULGARS AND MAGYARS ON THE MIDDLE AND LOWER DANUBE

Editors

Lyudmila Doncheva-Petkova – Csilla Balogh – Attila Türk

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Detail from Bowl No. 21 of the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure by Imre Huszár

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*BULGAR, AVAR AND KHAZAR ARISTOCRATIC NAMES
IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES
(SCYTHO-SARMATIAN AND ALTAIC HERITAGE
IN CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPE)*

Tsvetelin STEPANOV

This article aims at defending the thesis that out of the three main ethnic and political formations in Central and East Europe in the Early Middle Ages – the Avars, the Bulgars and the Khazars – the Bulgars were the most strongly influenced by Iranian traditions. This influence is most clearly discernible in the first names of Bulgar rulers as well as some noblemen in the period until the late 9th century. If we add to this conclusion the fact that there are six fire temples found on the territory of the early medieval Bulgar Khanate (at Pliska, Madara, Preslav and the ancient Durostorum, present-day Silistra), which have an undeniable Iranian origin in the plans (on the temples see ДОНЧЕВА 2005, 73–94; ВАКЛИНОВ 1977, 111–114; СТАНИЛОВ 1982, 225–234; ОВЧАРОВ 1983, 56–62; ГЕОРГИЕВ 1989, 338–353; ТЕОФИЛОВ 1995, 298–306; БОНЕВ 1989, 328–337; СТЕПАНОВ 1999, 156–160; БОЯДЖИЕВ 2008, 310–339; КОЛЕВА-КИРИЛОВ 2008, 610–611. References about the same type of temples in Bulgar-Alan environment, the so-called Saltovo-Мауаскава culture can be found in БИДЖИЕВ 1984, 115–125; БИДЖИЕВ 1989, 34–45; ВИННИКОВ–АФАНАСЬЕВ 1991, 118–140. References about the plans of Iranian fire temples in Persia and Middle Asia can be found in РАПЕН 1994, 128–139, and SARIANIDI 1996, 319–329) as well as the self-identification of the Bulgar(ian) by the Iranian personal pronoun for first person singular, “az”/“azi” (СТЕПАНОВ 1999, 39), we can make the conclusion that the study of the Bulgars through the prism of Turkic origin only, so typical for the academic studies from the late 19th century onwards until the present, puts in fact lots of limitations in front of scholars and presupposes a narrow-minded interpretation of the facts. Hence, the above mentioned presumption often results in inadequate conclusions. Bringing the Bulgars on the “Procrustean bed” of *Turkicness* undoubtedly sets bounds to the horizons of academic investigation and thus impedes adequate and unprejudiced research on the past in general and the various phenomena

typical for this region from the 6th until the 9th century, in particular. Frequently, in the period under discussion we can detect specific interferences of autochthonous, Iranian (Indo-European or Scytho-Sarmatian) and Altaic traditions and just because of this reason we should be more cautious during the investigation of the various layers provided by the available sources.

When speaking about the temples, it is worth remembering another fact: in the pre-modern period usually it was the supreme ruler who was the keeper of the sacred fire, and for that reason he was a high priest as well; such keepers of the eternal fire were, for example, the Iranian rulers from the Seleucid dynasty – their title, according to the Iranian tradition, was “*fratadara*”, i. e. “*keeper of the fire*” (ROUX 2008, 132). It is probably not accidental that in the pre-Christian period the Bulgar fire temples were also situated on the territory of the main residences of the supreme rulers of Bulgaria (at Pliska, Preslav, Madara and Drastar/Dorostol/Silistra).

In addition, we should not forget that *ca.* 90 stone inscriptions, dated to the period preceding the official conversion of the Bulgars to Christianity in the 860s, were found in present-day Bulgaria until 1990s (БЕШЕВЛИЕВ 1992). Apart from the large number of such sources there is still no evidence that the Bulgars had used titles typical for the Turkic khanates, such as “*khagan*”, “*shad*”, “*irkin*”, “*chor*”, “*tudun*”, etc. However, they used “*tarkan*”, “*bagatur*” and “*boil*” – titles used also by the Turks and the Alans as well as by other eastern and northern Iranians in the Early Middle Ages.¹

The problem of the first names of people and *ethnoi* inhabiting this part of Europe during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages has been studied with a special attention by specialists from Hungary, Germany, Austria, the former Soviet Union and Bulgaria since the population of the formations mentioned above has inhabited territories,

¹ See СТЕПАНОВ 1999, 76–104, and the table on p. 204.

which are within the boundaries of present-day Bulgaria, former Yugoslavia, Russia, Ukraine and Hungary mainly. The approaches were quite similar – looking for etymological explanations for certain first names or ethnonyms.² For example, it is usually stated that the name of one of the Avar khagans, “*Bayan*” originates from the Iranian *baga*, *bhaga* meaning *rich*. This name was used by the Bulgars as well; as it is well known, it was the name of khan Qubrat’s eldest son – Bat’Bayan, i.e. “*the eldest/the senior (among Qubrat’s sons) brother*” derived from the Iranian “*pati*”, which was later transformed into “*bat*” (cf. the very popular form of address to an elder brother until present days in Bulgaria – “*bati*”, or its abbreviation “*bat*”). We have scarce information about the first names of other Avar khagans or noblemen, e.g. “*Apsih*” (Menander II.17), or “*Kandih*”, which are believed to be related to the Altaic heritage reminding of the names of earlier “*Hun*” chieftains, for example Dengizih; at the same time such first names, i. e. names with ‘-ih’ suffix were not typical of Bulgar royal names.³ Ermitsis is usually believed to be related to the Bulgar family “*Ermi(ar)*”. According to A. Moshev (МОШЕВ 2008, 34), “*Ermi*” is in fact “*Hermes*” and through this name the Bulgars kept “*the Bosphoran family tradition*” (See more about the name “*Hermes/Hermas*” in КОРПУС,⁴ excluding those who had been converted to Christianity in the late 8th century and had most often taken names from the Old Testament. However, this problem is beyond the scope of the present article.

Larger amount of information is provided by Khazar first names, which are also a long-standing subject of study. Specialists state that these names have either Turkic or Jewish background and sometimes Iranian roots, secondarily used by the Turkic-speaking Khazar aristocrats (see details in Kevin Brook’s website <www.khazaria.com>, the ‘Khazarian Names’ related part, where the studies of Gy. Moravcsik, D. Dunlop, V. Minorsky, P. Golden (GOLDEN 2003, 15–27), M. Erdal, etc. are enlisted.)⁵

The problem with these names is that most of them are preserved by other, non-Khazar, sources and actually present to the scholars foreign phonetics and not the original Khazar one. Despite that it is clear that first names among Khazars such as “*Bulan*”, “*Buga*”, “*Barsbek/Bardzhik*”, “*Kundadzhik/Kundadzh*”, “*Yotemish*”, “*Tarmah*”, “*Kuderkin*” and other similar names have undoubtedly Turkic origin. Some of them, as it has been pointed out long ago, had in fact been titles, which during the years became first names. Even early medieval writers paid attention to the fact that this was quite common in Sassanid Iran.

The first names of the Bulgar rulers and aristocrats are very often found in the written sources of the period under study probably due to the common border between the First Bulgarian kingdom and the Byzantine Empire. Some of them are also present in original Bulgar (or Old Church Slavonic sources dated to the late 9th century) and reveal certain metamorphoses resulting from the introduction of the Slav language in Bulgaria after 893 AD. For example, “*Persian*” who reigned as Khan of Bulgaria from 836 until 852 AD turned into “*Presian*” or even “*Prussian*” in some of the later Byzantine written sources.⁶

Since this short article does not aim at presenting all the details related to the above mentioned aspect, I will try to summarize the available data.

What are the first names of Bulgar aristocrats which can be most probably connected to Turkic heritage and traditions related to names? “*Korsh*” ((*O*)*Korsis*), “*Toki*” (*Toktos*), “*Chepa/Dzhepa*” (*Tzepa*), “*Shun*” ((*O*)*Hsunos*), “*Isbul*” (*Isbulos*) seem to be such names. “*Omurtag*” (*Omurtagos*, *Mertagon*, *Murtagos* as provided by various sources in Greek or Latin)⁷ and “*Sivin*, *great zhupan in Bulgaria*” (as stated by the inscription on his silver cup) is also among the nominees, although there is no unanimous opinion among scholars on it.⁸

In recent publications it has been stated that “*Turdats/Turdach*” is also a name of Turkic origin

² B. Simeonov is a very typical example in Bulgaria in this respect. See the essence of his thesis in Б. СИМЕОНОВ: *Прабългарска ономастика*. Пловдив 2008.

³ Cf. “*Ermitsis*”, Avar chieftain, ca. 626 – see Gy. Moravcsik also see W. POHL 1988, 18, 28, 38, 186, 223 – *Kandich* (558/9); 63 f., 101, 118 – *Apsich* (570–602); 188, 252, 271, 273 – *Ermitzsis* (626).

⁴ 1965, Nos. 73, 102, passim – “*Ermes*”, “*Ermas*”, especially № 399 – “*Ermi-as*”.

⁵ Also see PRITSAK 1985, 205–211; RÁSONYI–BASKI 2007.

⁶ About the name “*Persian*” see ДУЙЧЕВ 1960, 479–482. The same text also in ДУЙЧЕВ 1981, 343–346.

⁷ See MORAVCSIK 1958, 217–218; СИМЕОНОВ 1984, 540–542; МИХАЙЛОВ 1992, 69–71.

⁸ See КОРПУС 1965, № 897 – “*Savion*”. Some specialists accept that “*Sondoke*”, the name of one of the noblemen of knyaz Boris-Michael, the prince who converted the Bulgars to Christianity in 865 AD, who visited Rome in the 860s, is also Turkic. There is another hypothesis, recently proposed by Т. Крастанов, that “*Sondoke*” was not a first name but a title of the Old Bulgarian writer and diplomat Petar, who was komit and ichirguboil and later (after 879 AD) renounced the ichirguboil title and became chernorizets (i. e. monk). See КРЪСТАНОВ 2008, 85; also ИВАНОВ 1933, 626.

(ПОПКОНСТАНТИНОВ 1987, 128; also see ГЮЗЕЛЕВ 2000, 31 – “Turduzo”). However, some Armenian scholars believe that his name is almost an exact copy of the Armenian “*Trdats*” (БАРТИКЯН 1984, 40–45, especially 43–44). Other Bulgar first names such as the royal ones “*Zabergan*”, “*Asparukh*”, “*Kuber*”, “*Tervel*”, “*Kardam*”, “*Krum*”, “*Malamir*”, “*Persian*”, “*Zvinitsa*”, “*Rasate*”, as well as several names of aristocrats, e.g. “*Mostich*” (ДУЙЧЕВ 1998, 247), “*Negavon*”, etc., have undeniable parallels or etymologies among the Iranian (Indo-European) circle of *ethnoi*. The Kutrigur Zabergan for example (mid-6th century) (АГАФИЙ 1996; ПРОКОПИЙ 1998, 64, 91, 129, 267; МОРАВЦСІК 1958, 128) had the same name as the Sassanid commander Zabergan, who also lived during the same century (the 530s–540s) and apparently enjoyed the shahanshah Khosrow I Anushirvan’s high confidence. And here comes the logical question, although it did not seem to bother Procopius of Caesarea, was the Sassanid aristocrat Zabergan of Turkic or Iranian origin?

The Bulgar ruler Kardam (777–802) was a namesake of Kardama, the ruler of the Central Asian Saka tribes living in present-day India since ancient times (cf. the Kardamaki dynasty ruling over the territories of the present-day Indian states of Gujarat and Rajasthan). And it is worth reminding that almost all scholars believe that the ancient Saka tribes were of East Iranian origin.

The first name of the Bulgar chieftain, Kuber (late 7th century) is almost identical with the name of the Indian god of wealth, Kubera, i.e. in this case the relation with Indo-Iranian heritage might also be the right direction to follow. The Iranian etymology of the name “*Asparukh*” is also beyond any doubt according to the specialists (ДУЙЧЕВ 1953, 353–356). The name of the Bulgar ruler Krum reminds of the name of Grumbat, the king of the Chionites living in Middle Asia (JUSTY 1895; ДОБРЕВ 1991, 139; ДОБРЕВ 1994, 78), i.e. Bat’ Grum, who lost his son during the siege of Amida in 362 AD as described in detail by Ammianus Marcellinus (XVIII. 6; XIX. 1–2). The name of another Bulgar khan, Telets (Teletzes in Theophanes the Confessor, Telessios in Patriarch

Nicephoros) reminds very much of a first name of the ancient Bosporean Kingdom, Telesinos/Teleseinos (КОРПУС 1965, Nos. 59, 924).

Vladimir (889–893), another Bulgarian ruler, bearing the pagan name of “*Rasate*”, was in fact a namesake of the Sassanid commander Ra(h)zates/Rahzad, a statement which is accepted by a number of scholars.⁹ “*Royal*” Bulgar names, such as “*Malamir*” (who reigned between 831 and 836) and his successor “*Persian*” (836–852), already mentioned above, undoubtedly also have an Iranian background. Neither “*Tervel*”, who was a sovereign of Danubian Bulgaria until 721 AD and helped Justinian II to ascend the throne in Constantinople again in 705 AD, nor “*Zvinitsa*”¹⁰ can be related to any similar first names from the Altaic language family provided by the written sources and the Turkic heritage. In the 1980s, the Bulgarian scholar К. Попконстантинов (ПОПКОНСТАНТИНОВ 1987, 123–135; also see ГЮЗЕЛЕВ 2000, 31, 232) found exactly the same first name in a Latin text in the form of “*Trebel*”, in a document kept in the archive of St. Peter monastery in Salzburg; the document is dated to the 8th–9th centuries and is related to the name of Vergilius, Bishop of Salzburg (710–784).

Apart from the names mentioned above, those of the Bulgar ichirguboila Mostich (who died in the second half of the 10th century) and the nobleman Negavon/Negabon (known from a stone inscription found in present-day Bulgaria and dated to the first half of the 9th century) can also be related, in the first case, to the Bosporean Kingdom’s heritage and its strong Scytho-Sarmatian traditions,¹¹ and in the second case to the name of the Persian aristocrat Negaban. First names such as *Mastous*, *Mastas*, *Mostios* are evidenced on stone inscriptions in that same Bosporean Kingdom (КОРПУС 1965, Nos. 417, 795, 963). A scholar from the former Soviet Union, D. B. Shelov, and some others¹² remind that the first name “*Mastous*” was very popular in the Bosporean Kingdom and that it was of Iranian origin. It is worth remembering the name of “*Mostis*”, the king of the Thracian Besi tribe, who most probably was an ally of the Pontic Bosporean king between 111 BC and 105 BC in the struggle of the

⁹ See HONIGMANN–MARICQ 1953, 55, referred by I. Duichev in ДУЙЧЕВ 1998, 247 and Note 280; also see ДУЙЧЕВ 1955, 335–336.

¹⁰ Cf. СТОЙНЕВ 1985, 154 – the three sons of Omurtag bore Slavic names. However, the author does not provide any proof endorsing this statement. See also the thesis proposed by O. Kronsteiner that the names “*Asparukh*, *Krum*, *Tervel*, *Omurtag*, *Presian*, *Kardam*, *Malamir*, etc.” were Slavic ones (sic!?) (ИСТИНАТА 2005, 57).

¹¹ See the opinion of V. Beshevliev in ИВАНОВ 1964, 74, on the Iranian origin of the name of the 10th century Bulgar aristocrat “*Mostich*”; БЕШЕВЛИЕВ 1967, 237–247. On the Bosporean traditions see also ПРИЦАК 2006, 16–19; ЧУРЕШКИ 2001, 27; СТАНЕВ 2005, 25–34.

¹² ШЕЛОВ 1974, 80–93, especially p. 82; also see the studies of L. Zgusta, V. S. Miller, V. Abaev, J. Harmatta, etc.

latter against the Romans (for further details see in САПРЫКИН 1996, 153–154).¹³

Again in relation with the Thracian, basically Indo-European, heritage I would like to call attention to an old hypothesis of H. Gregoire that the name of the Bulgar dynasty “*Dulo*” known from the so-called “*Name List*” of the Bulgar khans, is quite similar to the first name Doulas, found in Greek stone inscriptions from Tanais (the Bosporan Kingdom) (GREGOIRE 1945, 117, Note 37). M. Vasmer has focused attention on the same Bosporan first name even earlier, pointing out its similarity to the Alanic name Dula (VASMER 1923, 38), about which J. Marquart believed that it was a tribal Alanic name as well (MARQUART 1903, XXXIII, 145, 155, 172). Quite recently this connection has attracted the attention of A. Moshev (МОШЕВ 2008, 19–35, especially 32–34). He claims that there was a “*Thracian-Sarmatian theonim*” Doules/Doulas/Dulus, probably related to “*the celestial-solar cult*” and it probably turned into first and family name in a later period. The hypothesis that behind the name “*Dulo*” in the so-called “*Name List*” one can see Du-lu (together with Nushibi) mentioned by various 7th century written sources¹⁴ is unacceptable since Du-lu was a tribal confederation in the Turk (First) Khaganate, while in the “*Name List*” it is explicitly stated several times that “*Dulo*” was the first royal clan of the Bulgars (МОШЕВ 2008, 25).

Here I would like to sum up:

1) The nature of the Bulgars is heterogeneous as it was pointed out by the famous Bulgarian specialist V. Beshevliev several decades ago (БЕШЕВЛИЕВ

1967, 237–247; БЕШЕВЛИЕВ 1981, 20–25).¹⁵ It is obvious not only from the identification markers such as the Iranian personal pronoun for first person singular and the presence of at least six temples of fire in Danubian Bulgaria, but also from their various burial rites and practices as well as from the typical artificial cranial deformation having distinct Sarmatian origin;

2) It is crucially important to recognize the fact that such type of states are multiethnic and multilingual; they comprise too many Indo-Iranian traditions to be easily neglected and this is especially true for the Bulgars;¹⁶

3) In view with more adequate methodology for studying the first names of the state elite of Avars, Bulgars and Khazars, and especially of the so-called royal names of the Bulgars, in a number of cases it seems a better solution to look for complete (or partial) analogies with similar aristocratic first names in the Iranian cultural milieu, instead of seeking hypothetical Turkic etymologies for one or another component of a certain name.¹⁷ Therefore, in my opinion, the Indo-Iranian (Scytho-Sarmatian) and the Indo-European heritage in general of the Bulgars¹⁸ should not be underestimated if we aim at achieving greater success in the unprejudiced study on this issue. It is obvious that the Indo-Iranian/Indo-European background is much more important for the ethnogenesis of the Bulgars than evidenced in the data available for the Khazars or the Avars.

Translated by Tatiana STEFANOVA

¹³ Cf. also the Thracian “*royal*” names Kotis I, II and III, kings of the Odrussian tribes after the 4th century BC and the name – royal again (!) – Remetalk; such “*royal*” names can be found among the Bosporan kings as well (see ГАЙДУКЕВИЧ 1949, 334; МАСЛЕННИКОВ 1990, 101–118, 161–170, especially p. 105, 107, 112, 116, 164, 166, 169).

¹⁴ Different versions of this hypothesis are supported by L. Gumilyov, B. Simeonov, V. Stoyanov, M. Kaymakamova, D. Dimitrov, G. Nikolov, etc. Contra: МОШЕВ 2008, 19–35, who provides various arguments against the identification of Du-lu and Dulo.

¹⁵ Also see РАШЕВ 1993, 23–34; СТЕПАНОВ 1999, 174–176; СТЕПАНОВ 2003, 11–91; СТЕПАНОВ 2008, 12–16.

¹⁶ See РАШЕВ 1993, 23–34; РАШЕВ 2008, and also studies by P. Dobrev, Ts. Stepanov, G. Vladimirov, etc.

¹⁷ Cf. for example МОРАВСКИ 1958, 153–154. The name of the Bulgar khan “*Kardam*” derived from the hypothetic ‘türk.-bulg. Qardamış’ (!?), S. 165: the name “*Kuber*” derived from the hypothetic ‘bulg.-türk. Küver’ (!?), although such Turkic first name is not found in the sources.

¹⁸ About the influence of Sarmatian traditions in the cemeteries in Northeastern Bulgaria and Southeastern Romania as well as in other aspects see АНГЕЛОВА 1995, 5–12; ГЕОРГИЕВ 1997, 45–65; РАШЕВ 2000. As early as 1913 D. P. Daskalov has published a small book, “*Българите – потомци на царствените скити и сармати*”. София 1913.

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