

BOOK REVIEW

ВЛАДИМИРОВ Г. *Великата България на Волга през средните векове* [The Great Bulgaria of the Volga during the Middle Ages]. София: Просвета, 2019. 160 с.

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In his research on the Bulgars, Géza Fehér (1939) emphasizes their state-building tradition and their civilizational role in the formation of Eastern Europe. The example of Danube Bulgaria founded in 681 by Khan Asparuh, whose successor is modern Bulgaria, is well known. But the theme of the other Bulgarian state called Volga or Volga–Kama Bulgaria, which lasted from the 10th century to the 1240s and left lasting traces in the culture of the peoples of the Middle Volga, also known in the European world, is still insufficiently studied, although it was in the focus of research as early as in the 18th century. So far, this topic has remained outside modern history books and academic courses in Bulgarian schools.

That is why the appearance of the latest monograph on Volga Bulgaria by Georgi Vladimirov, printed by the renowned Bulgarian ‘Prosveta Publishing House’, should be defined as essential. Developed for a wide scope of readers and in particular for pupils and students, presented in plain language along with lots of illustrative materials, the publication has all marks of serious research. It is supported by a rich reference list, an up-to-date bibliography, comparative chronological tables, historical maps, and – what is really significant – by difficult-to-access excerpts translated into Bulgarian from the most important sources for the history and culture of Volga Bulgaria. Arguing with some inappropriate and incorrect approaches to the heritage of Volga Bulgaria and especially with the manifestations of the recently popular ‘parahistory’, the author relies on rich documentary and archaeological evidence to reveal the historical development and cultural specifics of Volga Bulgaria, analyzed in the context of ethnodynamics of the Middle Volga region. Also indicative is the innovative socio-anthropological format of the study presenting not only political events but also the weekdays and holidays of the elite and ordinary people, their life,

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material culture, ideas about disease and health, etc., which fully corresponds to the demands of modern European historiography.

The introductory part focuses on the image of Volga Bulgaria in Bulgarian science, highlighting the contributions of Russian, Ukrainian, and Hungarian researchers (S. Shpilevsky, A. P. Smirnov, O. Pritsak, István Fodor, and István Zimonyi). The historical and cultural context of the Middle Volga region is presented as well as the 'Old Great Bulgaria', the earliest known Bulgarian state in Europe created by Bulgarian Unogonduri ruled by Khan Kubrat. The main part traces the existence of Volga Bulgaria from its birth to its sunset, paying special attention to martial arts, diplomacy and international contacts with the Baghdad Caliphate, Kievan Rus', and the Kingdom of Hungary (pp. 45–53); urban planning and cult architecture (pp. 54–62); economic culture and coinage (pp. 63–72); everyday life (pp. 73–82); and culture (pp. 83–91). Data on contacts with the Western world preserved by the Hungarian chronicler Anonymous (10th century) and its testimony about the participation of Volga Bulgarian emigrants in the emergence of Pest, today part of the Hungarian capital, are recalled.

The summary points out that, formed by the civilizational heritage of the inhabited region and influenced by the relations with its neighbours (Khazar Khaganate and Kievan Rus'), by the religious model of Islam and the ethnic composition of its population, Volga Bulgaria forms specific historical and cultural characteristics, which distinguish it from Danube Bulgaria and 'turn it into a creator of science and culture for the whole Islamic world', as G. Fehér claims. The conclusion presents the fate of cultural and economic traditions, which was left by the Volga Bulgars to the new political entities in the region (Kazan Khanate) after the fall of the cities of Bilyar, Bolgar, and Suvar in the 1230s as well as their radical destruction in the second half of the 16th century, when the 'Bulgarian era' in the history of the Middle Volga definitely ended.

The book is a result of many years of research by the author and it is successfully included in the dialogue of contemporary European humanities. It poses a number of questions to specialists and the curious reader, consolidating knowledge not only about Bulgars, Bulgarian statehood, and Bulgarian state formations in time and space but also about the interaction between cultures and the richness and diversity of today's European world.

