

Supplement

Saltovo Culture, Protobulgars and contemporary Bulgarians in archeology and historiography.

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The recent successes of scholars like Komatarova in tracing the roots of Lower Danube Protobulgarian biritualism in Krasnodar area and generally – in the northwest Ciscaucasia (where the Byzantine sources placed Old Great Bulgaria) enable us to narrow the zone of Protobulgarian ethno genesis similarly to what was done by Botalov using general archaeological observations only.

The political turmoil in the Easteuropean Steppes of the 1st-2nd c. AD forced Sarmatian tribes to move – some to the West, including the Danube delta area, others to the south, closer to the Caucasus Mountain, in less exposed Ciscaucasus areas. Part of this movement is detected through the disappearance of the early Sarmatians from the steppes extending on the right bank of the Kuban river and their reappearing in the river's middle reaches (Istvanovits 2018,151-152). The ethno genesis of Protobulgarians probably started in this very area in the late 2nd and early 3rd c. with this wave of Sarmatians entering the Ciscaucasia and starting to live alongside indigenous (older) tribal groups and be influenced by their culture.

It is notable that this new wave of peoples was highlighted as related to Protobulgarians as early as mid 20th c. by key scholars like Nikolay Merpert (Merpert 1958, 586-588). It was likely this migration in the area that caused the political turbulence north of the Caucasus reported by Movses Khorenatsi, who claims that *“...in the days of Arshak there was massive dismay in the chain of the Great Caucasian mountain in the lands of the Bulgharians and many of*

them separated and arrived in our land and lived long under the Kol..." (Khorenatsi 1990, 67). It was proposed by recent research that those settlers who crossed the mountain and settled preserved their "*Vanandur*" ethnic labeling and probably some original features for a long period while living in the Upper Basean area that bore the name *Vanand* (Golijski 2006,643-644). The migration happened most likely in the time of king Valarsh II (185-198) and was followed by less peaceful events – several hostile invasions by the different tribes living north of the mountain (Golijski 644-645). The strong Caucasian DNA signal in Protobulgarians, Alans and present day Bulgarians supports the historical data about long interaction between the Protobulgarians and the indigenous people of the Caucasus, particularly Alans, Armenians and probably even Iberians. Alternative explanation would be that the signal was passed to Protobulgarians through the massive inclusion of Caucasian Alans (having strong Caucasus inheritance themselves) but such version is less likely considering the key differences between Protobulgarian and early Alan archaeological cultures.

Unlike Bulgars, who remained bearers of strong Late Sarmatian features up to the Danube Bulgaria phase (7th-8th c.) , the Caucasian Alans seem less influenced by those new tendencies (Late Sarmatian features) and seem to have preserved a strong tie with Middle Sarmatian culture (Gabuev 2009,150-155). The debate if the Alans ultimately migrated from Central Asia or developed "locally" in the Steppes of Eastern Europe and the Ciscaucasus is far from a solid solution, but apparently part of them was absorbed or seriously mixed with the older population in the Ciscaucasus. It is likely that "Alan" was a polytonym covering different related steppe peoples, a warrior elite that subdued and mixed various groups, including the older Caucasian tribes (Istvanovits 2018,151).

Thus it seems that the Bulgar ethno-genesis developed in an identifiable area in the north-west Ciscaucasia. Earliest sites for this period are Yúzhnaya Ozeréyevka and Tzemdolinsk necropolises, as well as other sites near Novorosiisk and Anapa. Those contain the earliest known cases of two key features - western orientation of the heads of the deceased buried with horses or cases of separate horse burials (Botalov 2010,11). Those features amongs new type of grave goods were probably introduced by an arriving Sarmatian wave that started mixing with the local population. The area extended south to the coastal area of Tuapse, where the Bzid necropolis is situated. This “cradle” area included also present day Tamanski and Novorosiiski districts where the key necropolises Durso and Borisovski are situated. In the east it included the upper Kuban river area, where the Giliach necropolis with rectangular pits with stone plating and east or north head orientation. In this south-east section it likely overlapped with the areas inhabited by the early Alans (Map 1).

Botalov concludes that this “*Huno-Bulgarian*” area finally finished its formation in the Hunnic and Post-Hunnic period (5th-6th c.) and continued its existence up to 8th century. He considers that the core of the area was in its northern part (closer to the Steppes) where present day Tamanski and Novorosiiski districts are and where the key necropolises *Durso* and *Borisovski* are situated. Notable Russian researchers Gavrituhin and Pjankov connect this group with Kuvrat’s Great Bulgaria (Gavrituhin 2003,192).

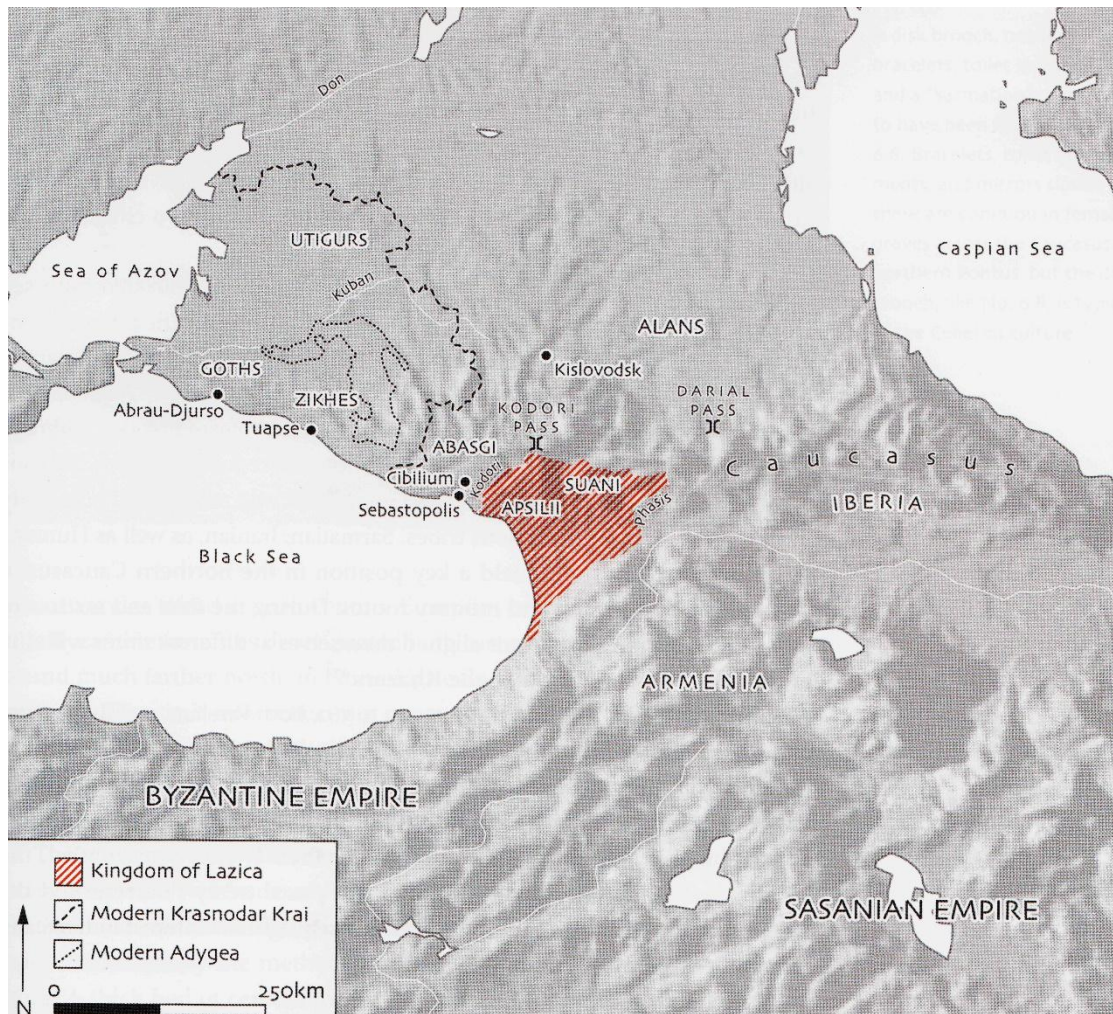
This otherwise solid concept encounters a problem – it cannot fit completely with certain data and facts. Those facts are: 1/the predominant orientation of graves in Danube Bulgaria sites is not West, but North-South, valid even for the very rare cases with horse burials, as underlined by Rashev (Rashev 2008,427) and others. 2/The stone cassettes used for cremations within biritual necropolises on the Lower Danube are very similar to the ones

used for inhumations in the Central Caucasus by the Alans and for cremations in the Kuban river area by the Protobulgarians (Komatarova 2011,34; Istvanovics 2017,404). 3/The Protobulgarian elite used predominantly west iranic names common in the Caucasus (especially Iberia) like Asparukh and Bezmer (Beshevliev 1967; Chobanov 2006). 4/The Bulgars are considered by some scholars as bringers of both Penkovsk and Caucasus features within the early Avar culture in Panonia (Pohl 2018,101).

All those observations and especially the archaeological ones bring the conclusion that the Royal tribe of the Great Bulgaria period – the *Unogondurs*, known as *Nandor* to ancient Hungarians and *V-n-n-t-r* in Josephus the Khagan's letter and Perso-Arab sources (Symonyi 1957, 41-42; Rona-Tas 1999,215; Golden 1992,102) had somewhat different ethno genesis within a larger group of similar tribes and were particularly under strong Alan-Caucasian influence, inhabiting the southernmost sections of a larger ethno-genesis area – closer to the mountain chain itself. Archaeological features of this Alan influence include black-grey polished pottery, stone cassettes, hokers and others. It is notable that the Unogondurs left strong impression in Armenian sources – we should recognize them in Movses Khorenatsi's *Vanandur* and Anania Shirakatsi's *Olhontor-Blkar*. This line of analysis – that there were different Bulgar tribes that were developing somewhat separately from each other but in neighboring areas is also confirmed by the famous list of Pseudo-Zahariah Rhetor. It counts the Bulgars twice – once as settled peoples with cities and neighbouring the Alans – those being the Unogondurs in the Ciscaucasus area and second time as nomads, living in tents – those probably being the one living in the steppes of the Don area – notably the Kutrigurs (PZR 2011, 447-449).

Living in the southernmost reaches of the described ethno-genesis area in the northwest Ciscaucasus – around the middle Kuban river area and south

of it (Map 1), the Unogondur-Bulgars emerged on the historical scene after the Turks weakened their grip on the region in the early 7th c. The decline and dispersing or change of identity of Utrigurs and Kutrigurs, highlighted by Agathias of Mirinea (Pohl 2018,32), enabled the Unogondurs to unite both related Bulgar and other, not-related groups into the Old Great Bulgaria of Theophanes and Nicephorus.



Map 1. The zone of Protobulgarian ethnogenesis in the Ciscaucasia. The available archaeological and genetic data suggest intensive contacts and intermixing between Protobulgarians and early Alans/other Caucasian populations. After Adams 2014,253

The research carried in this article, combining written sources, archaeological data and DNA research, brings the debate about the origin of Protobulgarians into another level by identifying their Ciscaucasian cradle and

thus – their Sarmatian-Caucasian origin, similar to those of early Caucasian Alans. It, however, could not answer many questions that will remain to be solved. The ethnolinguistic identity of the ancient Bulgars and particularly the channels of ancient Turkic influence need to be further clarified – was it only a political phenomenon of the 6th-7th c. or they were seriously mixing up earlier with indisputably early Turkic tribes like the Sabirs? How the ethnonym “Bulgar” appeared and when exactly, was it a political designation that spread over various tribes of different ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic identities? Was the Protobulgarian elite belonging to different ethnicities and what were they?

The future research – archaeological and genetic – will probably allow us to reexamine many of those issues, answer those questions and progress even further. But it is absolutely clear now that ancient DNA data will be invaluable asset for the proper understanding and interpretation of archaeological facts and – eventually – understanding History.

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