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FROM 'STEPPE EMPIRES'/'SUPER-COMPLEX CHIEFDOMS' TO 'EARLY STATES': THE CASE OF DANUBE BULGARIA AND KHAZARIA (RELIGIOUS ASPECTS)¹

Within the scope of a conference paper, it would prove difficult to outline every aspect of the correlation between the **type** of state and the religion/religions professed in it, which is why here I shall mainly attempt to outline a general framework for this correlation. My study is based on data concerning two early medieval states, Khazaria and Danube Bulgaria. The analysis will be mostly limited to sources from the 8th–9th centuries. These two states have been chosen quite deliberately, since their typology of origin is similar in many details, as well as the time – the first half and, respectively, the middle of the 7th century, and the place of their emergence – the region north of the Caucasus and surrounding the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, and, finally, due to the fact that both states adopted one of the three monotheistic religions as a 'state' religion. Of course, for those interested in a more general and comparative perspective on the issue of the connection between the adoption of one of the world religions with the process of state development in steppe Eurasia, I would like to recommend the well-known

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article of Anatolii Khazanov, published in 1994 and entitled ‘The spread of world religions in Medieval nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppes’ [*Khazanov, 1994*, p. 11–33; also see: *Stepanov, 2010*, p. 64–84, 119–125; *Petrukhin, 2016*, p. 285–291].

This is the moment to say a few words as to when a given political formation can be viewed as a ‘state’, and here I shall be using definitions and criteria proposed by the “scientific qagan” of steppe Eurasian studies, Prof. Peter Golden. In his opinion, and on a basic level, in order to speak of a ‘state’ we should have, firstly, a defined territory, usually with a metropolis; secondly, a centralized, supreme leadership (ruling house or clan) supported by an ideology (often combined with a religious system) justifying its rule; thirdly, centralized administrative offices (and officers) to carry out the management of the polity; fourth, these officers to have the monopoly over the means of force (to prevent fragmentation, for instance), and fifth, a system of taxation, including tribute, to support the polity. To this may be added some kind of institutional memory plus some form of writing. In his words, the typical nomads used different types of farming based on the varying environmental conditions and, consequently, did not create the same forms of political organizations; in addition, they rarely achieved and met all of the above criteria (for more details, see: [*Golden, 2018*, p. 317–332]).

It has long been known that while Christianity became the choice of the Danube Bulgarians, the Khazar elite embraced Judaism. At the same time, it should be noted that there is an important difference between the two cases with regard to the above-mentioned religions: the fact that in Khazaria, from the very beginning, e.g. some time between, roughly, ca. 740 and ca. 861 [*Golden, 2007*, p. 56] Judaism became the religion mainly of the state’s elite and their immediate circle, while the rest of the population remained true to either their pagan (traditional) faith or to one of the other two monotheistic religions, Islam or Christianity. In my view, this fact will play a significant role in relation to the further fate of both state formations. I presume that one of the main reasons for the final disappearance of Khazaria, in general between 965 and 969, as a result of the strikes of Kievan Rus’ against the Khazars, would be due to the lack of homogeneity in Khazar society, which, in turn, came as a consequence of the lack of a single and exclusive religion in the khaganate. It is important to be noted, however, that “missionary activities were forbidden by Judaism” and, therefore, “the converted ruler [of Khazaria] did not need to convert all his subjects as was the case in Christian and Muslim

traditions" [Petrukhin, 2016, p. 289; also see: Khazanov, 1994, p. 18]. This fact is crucial for one who wants to better understand the difference between Danube Bulgaria after its Christianization and the Khazar lands after the adoption of Judaism there.

At the same time, what do we see in Danube Bulgaria? By adopting a single religion that was obligatory for all subjects of the state, the Danube Bulgars succeeded in creating a far more homogeneous society after the second half of the 9th century (post 860s), thus upholding themselves as a people and their state idea even two centuries after Danube Bulgaria came under the rule of the Byzantine basilei in 1018. Let us focus on the following: the conquest of the Khazars by Sviatoslav of Kiev was accomplished quite quickly, from the middle to the end of the 960s. It was in that same time, when the attacks of this same Russian prince against the Danube Bulgarians also led to a serious disturbance in the state life of the Bulgarian tsardom. But the conquest of the eastern part of the tsardom in 971, i.e. almost simultaneously with Khazaria's demise under the attacks of Kievan Rus', although begun by Sviatoslav from 968 onwards, was not carried out by them, but by the most powerful Empire in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean of the time, Byzantium. The Byzantines, however, were forced to wage relentless wars with the western part of the Bulgarian tsardom for more than thirty years, before finally placing it under their full control in 1018. It seems, then, that since Byzantium, the most powerful state of the time, needed so many years and several military campaigns and operations in the lands of the Bulgarians in order to completely conquer them, this endurance of the Bulgarian resistance must be due not only to the martial qualities of the Bulgarians themselves, but also to reasons of a structural and mental nature. First of all, we should mention the Christian faith and the gradual imposition of a greater homogeneity in Bulgarian society, but at the same time also the introduction of a somewhat different cultural and political model, that of the Christian 'tsardom'. During the 10th century, the Bulgarians incorporated in this model the new Christian (in essence, Byzantine) political doctrines, while retaining some features from their own pagan past, which I might describe as 'steppe imperial'. A few years ago, I expressed the opinion that this 'double legitimization' was a key feature of the early medieval society in Bulgaria during the post-Christianization period and, in general, until the 11th century [Степанов, 2007, с. 197].

Did such or a similar 'double legitimization' exist in Khazaria after the adoption of Judaism? And if so, why did it not provide the society with

sufficient stability and homogeneity? A number of scholars have already commented on the doubling between Judaism and the Turkic (and steppe) principle in Khazaria (see: [Zhivkov, 2015, p. 17–126] with the literature cited there), so here, again, we have a synthesis between a monotheistic religion with the so-called nomadic (Turkic) statehood. The latter has recently been marked with the term ‘super complex chiefdom’ (to cite Nikolai Kradin, for instance) [Kradin, 2003, p. 73–87; Kradin, 2009, p. 25–51; Крадин, 2016, c. 91–115; also see: Тортука, 2006, c. 141, 503–504], while some authors still prefer the older definition, ‘steppe empire’ or ‘khaganate/qaganate’ [Grousset, 1939; Golden, 2001, p. 39–45; Степанов, 2005; Тортука, 2006, c. 134–145; Stepanov, 2010]. Boris Rashkovskii, for instance, claims that after the Judaization, the Khazar ruling elite retained their traditional Turkic ethnic identity, the latter being clearly visible in the letter written by the khagan-bek Joseph to Hasdai ben/ibn Shaprut of Cordoba. Rashkovskii concludes that this correspondence is an example of a ‘double ethno-confessional identity’ [Рашковский, 2014, с. 252–271, at 268]. Against this background, it should be said that the Danube Bulgarians had an even more difficult fate than the Khazar elite did, after they adopted Christianity after 864, and then a bit later (after 893) also the Slavic alphabet. As a result, the Bulgarian elite did not only have to unite the *Bulgarian* ‘principles’ with Christianity, like the Khazars did with the *Turkic* ‘principles’ and Judaism, but also to add the *Slavic* ‘principle’ to the *Bulgarian* one, in its sense of a sacred language for all the subjects of Danube Bulgaria from the 890s onwards. Nevertheless, after their Christianization, the Danube Bulgarians managed to create a more homogenous state than Khazaria!

And so, both political formations had the same starting point, the steppe empire. For Khazaria it was legitimate, since most probably a representative of the Ashina clan fled to Khazaria after the collapse of the Western Turkic Khaganate, thus enabling the Khazars to prolong the existence of the First Turkic Khaganate (see: [Артамонов, 1962, с. 170–171; Гадло, 1979, с. 136; Голден, 1993, с. 211–233, at 219; Golden, 1990, p. 263; Семёнов, 2010, с. 5–14, at 7; Семёнов, 2018, с. 289–301, at 293; cf. Новосельцев, 1990, с. 89, 134; Цукерман, 2002, с. 521–534]. At the same time, the state formation of Kubrat could not be called a ‘khaganate’, if the information preserved in the sources is to be strictly adhered to, although in reality it was just that (details see, in: [Степанов, 2016, с. 193–212]). As the Bulgars set foot on the Balkan Peninsula, however, the descendants of the Kubrat Bulgars led by Asparukh (d. 701), occupied lands of the Christian Roman Empire/Byzantium and so for them

the firm 'response' to the Roman/Byzantine basic postulates was more than obligatory, at least during the first century of Danube Bulgaria's existence (more see in: [Божилев, 1995, с. 11–72, esp. 17, 44–49; Божилев, 2017, с. 38, 376–379, 397–399, 414; Степанов, 1999, *passim*; Степанов, 1998, p. 247–254]. In terms of typology, both Bulgaria and Khazaria had to overcome similar obstacles in their path of development, both resisting very strong opponents in the south during the 7th–9th centuries. The Danube Bulgars, as has already been said, faced off against the Christian Byzantines, while the Khazars stood against the Muslim Arabs, respectively. In this 'challenge-and-response' situation, both political formations reached, in my opinion, a stage of 'early statehood' already before the end of the 8th century. The Khazars, however, were quite typical followers of the 'steppe empire', since formally their domains were located in the steppe of Western Eurasia to a far greater degree than those of the Bulgars, and, besides, they ruled over ethnic groups that were far more diverse in origins and levels of (economic) development in comparison with the Danube Bulgars.

It was Tatiana Kalinina who has recently once again raised the question of whether Khazaria could be called a 'steppe empire', after having existed for so many years. For her, the written sources do not offer a clear answer [Калинина, 2015, с. 134]. She cites Nikolai Kradin and his vision of Khazaria as a "quasi-imperial state-like structure". Kradin names the six most significant signs of this type of statehood, namely: 1) the dominance of clan ties; 2) the existence of officials dependent on redistribution; 3) the lack of a legalized governance system in written form, which is also confirmed by Al-Masoudi and Ibn Hawqal (cf. the issue of the various judges in Khazaria); 4) the lack of an institutionalized judicial sphere, i.e. there are no special judicial authorities; 5) the absence of a well-defined model in the redistribution and tax collection from subjects; and 6) very poor development of the state apparatus: the availability of data only regarding a khagan, shad/beq and some titles of officials and civil servants (e.g., tudun) [Крадин, 2007, с. 81]. On this basis, the conclusion of T. Kalinina is as follows: Khazaria was a "poorly developed state with a mixed nomadic and sedentary population that declined because of the underdevelopment of state structures" [Калинина, 2015, с. 134].

On the contrary, István Vásáry claims that Khazaria was marked by some very important characteristics of statehood, namely a well developed tax system and a state hierarchy. Moreover, he adds, the khaganate was "the most developed state in Eastern Europe" in the 8th–9th centuries

[Вашару, 2017, с. 211]. While he is right claiming that Khazaria was the most powerful and developed state in Eastern Europe in the 8th century, Vásáry missed the fact that Danube Bulgaria not only managed to catch up with the Khazars in the first half of the 9th century, but even to surpass Khazaria in the second part of that same century [Степанов, *Forthcoming*; also see Флёров, 2011, с. 220, 222–223].

I believe, nevertheless, that linking the decline and subjugation of Khazaria solely to the underdevelopment of the state structures is not sufficient to explain the above processes, if we fail to explicitly include as an additional factor the lack of homogeneity due to the presence of too many religions in the Khazar khaganate.

With the exception of the much stronger control over long-distance trade among the Khazars (details see in: [Noonan, 1985, p. 243–258; Noonan, 2007, p. 207–244; Kovalev, 2004, p. 97–129; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 147–170]), both of the here compared state formations demonstrate a similar level of economic development during the 8th–9th centuries, traceable mostly thanks to archaeological finds. This development, of course, could not be described as ‘feudalism’ and remains to be adequately typologized (on feudalism in Khazaria see: [Плетнёва, 1982, с. 10, 103, 106]; contra: [Тортика, 2006, с. 33, 504; Калинина, 2015, с. 129]; also see: [Флёров, 1993, с. 119–133; Флёров, 2010, с. 113–136, esp. 125 ff.; Noonan, 1995–1997, p. 253–318]). Especially for Bulgaria, on that same problem, see: [Даскалов, 2018, с. 294–330], and also: [Степанов, 2002, с. 23–38].

It seems to me that the greater dynamics in the process of the creation and development of the state and its structures can be seen among the Danube Bulgars, which is probably yet another reason for the latter to be able to build a state more stable than the Khazar one. I shall permit myself to propose the following model for the description of this dynamics in the political process in Danube Bulgaria from the late 8th to the early 10th century (more details see in: [Степанов, *Forthcoming*]). And so, at the end of the 8th century, there are still a number of features present that are typical for the ‘steppe empire’ stage. By the first few decades of the 9th century, however, a movement towards the establishment of the typical ‘early state’ can be observed; this stage will last until the 860s. The increased centralization of Bulgaria during the rule of Krum (802–814) and Omurtag (814–831) [Николов, 2005, с. 88–98, with the literature cited there], and especially after the Christianization gave a new impetus to the development of a more modern statehood in comparison with the Khazar

one. The Bulgar Omurtag imitated the Byzantine basilei following some Byzantine rituals, titles, fashions, etc. [Бешевлиев, 1992, с. 82–84, 87–88; Степанов, 2001, p. 1–19; Curta, 2006, p. 162–163; Sophoulis, 2012, p. 291, 303–305; Sophoulis, 2015, p. 63–74], which, in the words of Panos Sophoulis [Sophoulis, 2015, p. 63–74], was aimed at facilitating the incorporation of the conquered Christian population into the Bulgar khanate. For Sophoulis, however, the question as to the identification of the Christians with the khanate after 814 is still problematic and thus, he says, it is “hard to determine” whether all these Omurtag’s measures were indeed successful [Sophoulis, 2015, p. 69].

Also, to the pressure from Byzantium, which contributed to the increased centralization and ‘modernization’ of the Danube Bulgars in the first half of the 9th century, we should also add the ‘pressure’-and-challenge provided by the Franks after 820s (details see in: [Gjuselev, 1966, S. 15–39; Ronin, 1985, p. 39–57; Данчева-Василева, 1999, с. 70–71; Божилев, 2017, с. 316–320. Especially on the ‘modernization’, see: [Степанов, 2000, с. 212; Степанов, 2005, p. 263–279, and cf. Curta, 2006, p. 157–159]. Khazaria clearly did not endure such strong pressure during the 9th century, either from the Arabs, from Byzantium, or Khwarezm (although there is evidence of Christians and Muslims among the Khazars, as well as of missionary work carried out in the Khazar lands by representatives of these two monotheistic religions) (details see in: [Dunlop, 1954 (2nd ed., 1967); Golden, 1992, p. 241–243; Стефанов, 2003, с. 173–196; Петрухин, 2019, с. 213–231]! Following the 870s, Danube Bulgaria began to advance towards the type of state known as ‘barbarous state’, i.e. like the Western European states after the collapse of the Roman Empire, which saw the synthesis of the *Roman-and-Christian* principles with *Germanic* ones. Later, during the reign of the Bulgarian Tsar Simeon (893–927), after the first decade of the 10th century, the Bulgarians progressed towards a new cultural and political model, the so-called Christian ‘tsardom’s model. However, it still bore certain features of the ‘steppe heritage’, which is evident in the state administration and especially in the title practice (more see in: [Бакалов, 1985; Степанов, 1999; Степанов, 2007, 197–204; Аманасов, 1999; Гюзелев, 2007; Жеков, 2007; Славова, 2010]). This finding, in turn, goes hand in hand with the above conclusion, namely the existence of an exclusive religion among the Bulgarians after the third quarter of the 9th century, which allowed for an even greater homogenization of the society in Danube Bulgaria. It is thus clear from the proposed model of

Danube Bulgaria's development that I do not share the opinion of the late Bulgarian professor Ivan Bozhilov, who maintained in a number of his books and articles from the past three decades that the Bulgar statehood prior to the Christianization could be described with the term 'barbarous' state (for instance see: [Божилев, 1992, с. 3–34; Божилев, 1995, с. 11–76; Божилев, 2017, с. 37, 412–414]). The careful handling of facts makes it possible to outline quite clearly and far more precisely the stages in the dynamic development of the political state model of Bulgaria from the late 7th to the early 10th century. In this regard, I completely agree with Peter Golden, that "statehood is usually a process that evolves over time. It can be interrupted. It can be accelerated" [Golden, 2018, p. 317–332].

At the same time, Khazaria, from the very beginning of its existence as a state in the mid-7th century and until its demise, and regardless of the gradual adoption of Judaism there during the 8th–9th centuries (on this very controversial problem see: [Pritsak, 1981, № XI; Zuckerman, 1995, p. 238–270; Shepard, 1998, p. 11–34; Kovalev, 2005, p. 220–253; Golden, 2007, p. 123–162; Бубенков, 2016, с. 65–81]), shall remain first of all a kaganate, i.e. will bear the distinctive features of the 'steppe' statehood and thus shall not achieve the homogenization of its subjects within a single 'national' body.

To conclude, let me point to two statements, the first one by Valerii Flerov, namely that Danube Bulgaria was created "in line with European and not Asian history" [Флёрв, 2010, с. 124], and the second one – by Peter Golden, who claims that other states of nomad origin like those of the Bulgars (on the Balkans and along the Volga River) were a result of conquest; at the same time they were "formed beyond the western steppes" [Golden, 2018, p. 317]. So, it seems that both these claims are quite in place when comparing the historical path of Bulgaria with Khazaria and, in particular, when we search for correlation between the type of state and its religion as significant factors in the dynamic development of these two, and in general also other, political formations of the Early Middle Ages.

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**От степных империй к сверхсложным вождествам
и ранним государствам: Дунайская Болгария и хартия
(религиозный аспект)**

Резюме

Автор сравнивает два раннесредневековые государства, Хазарию и Дунайскую Болгарию, в период VIII – начала X вв., сквозь призму государственной модели и религии. В рамках IX в. Болгария, видимо, догнала и даже опередила Хазарию в отношении государственной модели. В основе этого развития стояло не только противостояние с двумя могущественнейшими христианскими государствами того времени – Византией и империей франков, но и принятие христианства болгарам. Оно позволило завершить процесс централизации Болгарии, уже начавшийся в первой половине IX в., и достичь – в сравнении с Хазарией – большей гомогенизации болгарской народности и, в результате, новой христианской имперской, или скорее – *царской*, модели государственности.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а : Дунайская Болгария, Хазария, «раннее» государство, суперкомплексное вождество, религии.