

# Forming the urban planning traditions in the east of Europe: small towns of Volga Bulgaria

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the problem of originating towns in the east of medieval Europe. The authors particularly focus on the attributes of the medieval feudal town in the Volga-Kama region. The unclear criteria for the socio-historical interpretation of Bulgar hillforts present significant problems not only to distinguish towns from the total number of fortified settlements, but also to draw a line between large, medium-sized and small towns. To identify small towns, it is necessary to rely not only on such well-known criteria as the area of a fortified settlement, the features of topography, the layout of defensive fortifications, but also to consider the specific features of the origin, the structure of the population and the functions of towns. The main problem lies at the methodological level as due to the informative lack of the available written sources, such a historical and cultural phenomenon as the Bulgar town is mainly studied by using archaeological methods. As a rule, most small towns appeared much earlier than the settlements of the surrounding rural population. Almost all of them were located along rivers and land trade routes, so their main functions were to control those vital economic and military routes. Moreover, the small towns in the Kama region had served as land centers since the Pre-Mongol period. In contrast to the medium-sized towns, most small towns have preserved their historical names. The data given in the article have taken account of the number of Pre-Mongol towns in Volga Bulgaria.

## 1 Introduction

The East of medieval Europe is rightfully considered a region where the unique tradition of urban planning has historically established and preserved the most practical elements of Byzantine, Central Asian, Steppe, and Ancient Russian architecture. Volga Bulgaria is a bright example of the tradition. That state on the Middle Volga appeared at the turn of the 9th-10th centuries and it became the first early feudal state along with Ancient Russia. The towns of the state are one of the traditional research areas of the Russian Medieval archaeologists. The study of various problems related to the origin, development, economy, culture, ecology, and population of the Bulgar towns is quite important now. Despite the significant advances in the study of proto-urban settlements (Ostolopovskoye Selishche, Izmerskoye Selishche), large capital centers (Bilyar, Bolgar), and some ordinary towns

(Kazan, Yelabuga, Dzhuketau, Chally, Kirmen), the Bulgar towns are poorly studied. Being the most important component of civilization, the Eastern European town includes complex ethno-cultural processes reflected in the rich archaeological material. The importance of the study lies in the fact that there is a belief in the futility and inefficiency of small towns. The purpose of this study is to show the role of Bulgar small towns as well as their place in the state of the Pre-Mongol period.

## 2 Materials and Methods

The most detailed analysis of the Bulgar town is given in the study of F.Sh. Khuzin [1], who has managed to correct the mistakes of a number of the predecessors in interpreting and dating the monuments. A.M. Gubaidullin has been fruitfully engaging in the typological classification of the Bulgar hillforts according to their topography and the defensive fortifications for recent decades [2]. The works of A.Z. Nigamayev [3], A.G. Sitdikov [4], R.M. Valeyev [5], N.G. Nabiullin [6], and Z.G. Shakirov [7] should be considered to be the components of modern historiography, covering the archaeology of medieval towns in the Middle Volga region and the Lower Kama region. The main problem lies at the methodological level. Due to the lack of the available written sources such a historical and cultural phenomenon as the Bulgar town is mainly studied by using the archaeological methods. Often, most settlements are only recorded formally-typologically (as hillforts taking account of the preserved remains of earth ramparts or ditches) and culturally (taking account of the findings collected on the surface and outcrops). Thanks to the excavations, no more than a dozen monuments can be considered relatively well-studied: Bolgar, Bilyar, Suvar, Kazan, Dzhuketau, Alabuga, Kirmen, Chally, Kashan, and Hulash.

More than 2000 Bulgar monuments of the VIII–XIV centuries were found on the territory from the Upper Posurye to the Upper Kama region, including about 190 settlements and about 1000 villages. Now almost 180 hillforts and 740 villages date back to Pre-Mongol times. However, there are considerable variations in the scientific literature. For example, not all the monuments in the Upper Kama region and Posurye can be called Bulgar.

R.G. Fakhruddinov has classified 38 remains of the Bulgar towns and their *detinetses* (*kremlins*). He regards 13 of them as small towns with the square of 10 to 50 hectares and 13 towns as *detinetses* (*kremlins*) of late times [8]. Although A.M. Gubaidullin does not have specific data on the number of small towns, but his works consider a number of hillforts and *posads* (settlements), the remains of feudal castles, such as Burakovskoye I, Chura-Baryshevskoye, etc., to be such towns [2]. F.Sh. Khuzin provides data on 35 towns, including 7 large towns, 22 medium-sized towns, and 6 small towns [1].

## 3 Results

The notion of a feudal settlement and the issue of its archaeological attributes have always attracted the attention of researchers. The medieval town (and the Bulgar one is no exception) is characterized as a multifunctional social element in the structure of the feudal state. It was a fortified settlement with administrative and political, religious, trade and craft, and military functions. It also controlled the agricultural district. And here comes in the thesis about the impossibility of existing the towns (and not just “urban-type settlements”) in a “pre-state society”. It is possible to partially agree with the statement that “the typology of urban settlements should be made by identifying the main socio-economic essence of the settlement, by determining its social character, rather than by external similarity” [9]. Undoubtedly, the socio-historical interpretation of the hillfort should be preceded by the

archaeological classification, taking account of the local topographical conditions, the square of the fortified territories, and the schemes of the defensive structures with their typologies.

When defining the notion of a town, it is advisable to refrain from giving very strict formulations in order to avoid schematizing and limiting such a complicated socio-cultural phenomenon, since it is obvious that attempts to define it using a set of criteria and features are futile [10]. The composition of these criteria and features constantly varies depending on the period of time and the place, and this makes it possible to determine the stages of the development and the ethno-cultural (regional) differences. The complete set of the criteria is just a conditional reference point. Despite the views about the complicated structure of the multifunctional Pre-Mongol town expressed by the Russian historiographers, the views about its craft and trade character, taking account of its military-political and administrative functions have prevailed for a long time [9, 11, 12, 13 and 14]. Considering urbanization to be primarily a cultural process, it is necessary to distinguish between the political and administrative functions that include the military and cultural ones. Thus trade and craft functions fall by the wayside. Since the Pre-Mongol period there has been no written or archaeological source confirming the dominance of the socio-economic functions aimed at enslaving the rural population by the ruling class. One can agree with O.G. Bolshakov that the notion of “town”, due to its obviousness, does not need to be defined, but that is why it is most difficult to give such a definition [15]. V.S. Flyorov’s arguments that there were no towns in the Khazar Khaganate, even in the X century [16], contradict the data from the written sources. We share the point of view that the traditions of Bulgar urban planning are really connected with the history of the Khazar Khaganate.

*The problem of distinguishing small towns.* It is caused due to the inconsistency the classification of hillforts with the typology of towns. It is known that large towns were not always large hillforts. And it is much more difficult to distinguish small towns from the fortified settlements, since there are no archaeologically perceptible attributes of small towns. The difficulty lies in the fact that the system of criteria developed by A.V. Kuza for Old Russian towns [13,17] cannot be applied to the Bulgar towns, as it has been suggested by V.A. Katunin [18]. Given the fact that the posad (an Old Russian settlement) in contrast to the defended hillfort cannot be uninhabited, the remains of the hillfort with evidence of active life are an important attribute of the town.

Even if we only rely on such a criterion as the square, two types of settlements can be attributed to the small towns of Volga Bulgaria.

The first type is a manmade, often a partially manmade fortified area (settlement) of no more than 10 hectares, adjoining to one or more settlements with the total square of no more than 10 hectares. Thus, a hillfort (“gorodishche”) is proportioned to or larger than a settlement (“posad”). Such small towns include Alabuga (Yelabuga hillfort – 3,4 hectares and posad – 3 hectares), Kirmen (Kirmen hillfort – 8,5 hectares and posad – 7 hectares), Kazan (the hillfort – about 5 hectares and posad –? hectares). In Alabuga the fortified posad is located 2 km away from the hillfort (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Yelabuga hillfort (“gorodishche”).

The Kirmen hillfort is at about the same distance from its largest settlement, which occupies a cape protected by the steep slopes. But in the northwestern part of the cape, the highest one, the detinets surrounded by a rampart and a ditch was built. The area of the detinets is 0,65 hectares (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Kirmen hillfort (“gorodishche”).

The second type. The hillfort has a small area – about 5 hectares and less, but the area of the posad (posads) can be up to 20 hectares. The examples of this type are the Pre-Mongol Dzhuketau (the hillfort – 5,8 hectares (Fig. 3), the posads – about 15 hectares) and Chally (the hillfort – 1,2 hectares, the posad – about 12 hectares?).

This list of small towns is most likely incomplete. Thus, the Balymer hillfort (3,5 hectares) with a small posad, considered to be the remains of the chronicle Balyamat, the Western-Voikin hillfort (10,8 hectares) with small posads, and the Alekseyev hillfort (6 hectares), associated by some researchers with the chronicle Tukhchin, should be classified as towns of type I.

It is quite possible that the Nizhnekacheyev (also known as Shibash) hillfort (2,6 hectares) with two posads (4 and 3 hectares), identified as the remains of a feudal castle, can be attributed to type II. The remains of stone and brick buildings, both in the hillfort and in the posad are consistent to criterion IV according to the scale developed by A.V. Kuza, namely,

the monumental architecture (civil stone buildings). The Old Nokhrat hillfort (3,8 hectares, Fig.4) with the posad (20 hectares), the Kriush II hillfort (2 hectares) with the posad (12 hectares), and the “Devil’s Town” (“Chyortov Gorodok”) (1,3 hectares) with a large posad-suburb can be attributed to the same type. The type should also include the Tubylgytau hillfort (2 hectares) with a large posad (?). F.Sh. Khuzin considers it to be a military fortress [1] although the information about the cultural layer, a large posad and a cemetery with tombstones indicate that it can be defined as a small town.

Due to the lack of research, there is no certainty about the Novomokshinsky complex, where there are two posads with the total area of 16 hectares and a hillfort (1,64 hectares). The situation is similar with the Shcherbet hillfort (12,6 hectares), which R.G. Fakhruudinov considers to be the remains of a small town [8].

**Table 1.** Small Towns in Volga Bulgaria of the Pre-Mongol Period.

Small Town's Name	Square of Hillfort (hectares)	Square of Posad (-s) (hectares)	River Basin
Alabuga	3.4	3	the mouth of the Toima River, a right tributary of the Kama River
Alekseyev hillfort (Tukhchin?)	6	unspecified	the left bank of the Kama River
Balymer	3.5	unspecified	the left bank of the Volga River
Dzhuketau	5.8	15	the left bank of the Kama River
Western-Voikin hillfort	10.8	unspecified	the right bank of the Akhtai River, the left tributary of the Kama River
Kazan	5	unspecified	the left bank of the Kazanka River, the left tributary of the Volga River
Kirmen	8.5	7	the Kirmyanka River, the left tributary of the Omarki River, the right tributary of the Kama River
Kriush II hillfort	2	12	the right bank of the Volga River
Nizhnekacheyev hillfort (Shibash)	2.6	7	the Shiya River, the right tributary of the Maly Cheremshan River, the right tributary of the Cheremshan River
Staro-Nokhrat hillfort	3.8	20	the right bank of the Nokhratka Brook of the right tributary of the Salmanka Brook of the left tributary of the Akhtai River
Tubylgytau	2	unspecified	the left bank of the Sheshma River, the left tributary of the Kama River
Chally	1.2	about 12?	the left bank of the Shumbut River, the right tributary of the Kama River
“Chyortov Gorodok” (“Devil’s Town”)	1.3	unspecified	the left bank of the Volga River

## 4 Discussion

*The problem of small towns' origin.* According to the archaeological research many small towns appeared much earlier than the settlements of the surrounding rural population. Therefore, the arguments of V.S. Flyorov that the essential condition for the origin of a “castle” (small town) is the concentration of the population or some earlier settlements have no grounds [16]. The small towns of Volga Bulgaria, even those located on the trade routes,

could not originate from proto-towns, because they appeared after the era of the latter had ended – at the end of the X–XI centuries. The Izmer, Semyonov, and Starokuibyshev settlements, which were the significant trade and craft centers of the X century, never turned into real towns.

The small towns cannot be the tribal centers. “Chelmata” that is mentioned in connection with the chronicle events of 1183 and is given as the name of the town in the Laurentian Codex, is associated with the population of Chally and its district [19]. This is rather a territorial designation than a tribal one. However, it should be noted that this is true for the Bulgar monuments. But this approach cannot be applied to the fortresses on the outlying territories, such as Zolotarevsky, Rozhdestvensky, Kylasovsky complexes, and Idnakar. При этом данная проблема имеет ряд других аспектов. At the same time this problem has some other aspects [20-25].

The Russian researchers have not formulated clear criteria to distinguish small towns from feudal castles up to now. In most of medieval Europe it was a feudal castle that became the basis of a new town. The issue of transforming a non-urban settlement (a castle, a fortress) into a town is not touched upon in modern Bulgar studies. It is incredibly difficult to draw a line between a large feudal castle with surrounding settlements and a small town taking account of the current state of research, so any differences between them are conditional. It should be noted that most of the well-known small towns originated from military fortresses rather than from feudal castles. The arguments about classical military fortresses on the territory of medieval Eastern Europe should be treated with caution [26]. *The problem of small towns' function.* None of the small towns mentioned had a low military and political status. At least, not any of them built to protect large (capital) cities can be regarded as satellite town. At the same time, according to the Russian chronicles (1183), they fulfilled the function of defending the state. Almost all small towns were located along rivers and land trade routes [5]. Therefore, their main function was to control those vital economic and military routes. Moreover, the small towns of the Kama region served as land centers in the Pre-Mongol period. In case of danger, the fortresses of the towns with small adjoining or sometimes outlying posads (Yelabuga, Kirmen) played a key role in the defense of territories.

It should be noted that in contrast to medium-sized towns most of the small towns have preserved their historical names. This is explained by the fact that they were located either along trade routes (Dzhuketau, Kazan, Alabuga, etc.) or in the northern outlying parts of the state (Chally, Kirmen); they mainly performed representative functions. But most importantly, the Bulgars and Tatars inhabited the towns before settling the Russians in them.

*The problem of the small towns' population.* The small town, perhaps even the medium-sized one, had a much smaller population than the large town with the same area (not to mention the towns with 1- or 2-storey buildings, which were built later). For example, in the Kirmen hillfort only 7 dwellings were studied on 3000 sq. m. of the uncovered area inside the detinets and outside it. But there could be as many as 150 dwellings in it.

The social structure of the small towns' population was heterogeneous. It is not logical to assume that they were inhabited by feudal lords with their military men, as well as craftsmen and merchants serving them. The fact is that a town without ordinary urban population is nonsense. Taking account of the fact that those towns were related to the farm land and agriculture, a lot of inhabitants and even most of them were highly likely engaged in agriculture. And that population had to perform duties and pay taxes; it was characteristic of the rural population. This fact can be traced conditionally in large towns, but the social stratigraphy is not at all traced geographically in small towns.

## 5 Conclusions

From the discussed above, we conclude that a small town of the Volga Bulgars played an important role in the life of the state. In comparison with the other types of towns, a small town is more difficult to distinguish from the total number of large military fortresses and feudal castles; any data on the number of small towns is conditional. Today it is possible to identify 13 such towns of the Pre-Mongol period. Taking account of the Staroromashkinsky complex (the hillfort – 2,2 hectares, posads-suburbs – 85 hectares), the number of medium-sized towns can reach 23, while the total number of towns is 43. But on condition that Krasnosyundyukov I hillfort (50 hectares) with a posad (75 hectares) and Krasnosyundyukov II hillfort (10 hectares) with a posad (24 hectares) should be considered to be the remains of one large town with a complicated plan, then there would be 21 medium-sized towns, 8 large ones, and their total number would be 42.

Thus, despite the fact that the medieval history of the Volga-Kama region is one of the most well studied areas, a small town regarded as a multifunctional social element in the structure of the feudal state needs a more detailed study.

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